STEVEN J. ROSEN, ED.

# Holy WAR

## Violence & the Bhagavad Gita

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# HOLY WAR

## *Violence and the Bhagavad Gita*

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*Holy War: Violence and the Bhagavad Gita*
Steven J. Rosen (Ed.)

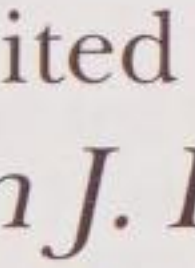
# HOLY WAR

## *Violence and the Bhagavad Gita*

Edited by

*Steven J. Rosen*

*Nyack, New York*



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Dedicated to
Tamal Krishna Goswami,
spiritual warrior, gentle soul, and dear friend

# FOREWORD

Little did I know, when my spiritual journey began at fourteen years of age, that the *Bhagavad Gītā* would have great significance during the beginning stages of my quest, as well as sustain personal and scholarly fascination throughout my life. Among the many scriptural texts of world religions I had encountered early on, the one sacred writing with which I truly struggled was the *Bhagavad Gītā*. From my first reading of this famous ancient Indian work, its most daunting, inscrutable, and startling feature became apparent: How could this sacred conversation between the supreme Lord Krishna and the blessed soul Arjuna be advocating, on the one hand, nonviolence (among other profound ethical and spiritual principles), and, on the other, be set in the middle of a battlefield? How is it that Arjuna, the great warrior, was about to fight with his own army of qualified soldiers against an opposing army that aggressively faced him, and at the same time attain spiritual enlightenment?

This short eighteen-chapter book of some 700 beautiful flowing Sanskrit verses opens with the tension of imminent battle as each of the armies looks over the other. By the end of the first chapter and the beginning of the second, our narrator describes how the full impact of the battle-to-be suddenly dawns on Arjuna, as he is about to lead his own men toward an enemy army that consists of many of his own friends, relatives, and teachers. Arjuna, anticipating that he will have to fight, perhaps even kill, those for whom he has felt love or deep respect, is overcome by grief and hurled into deep depression.

The *Gītā* opens with an irresolvable ethical conflict. Does the virtuous and noble warrior-general, Arjuna, protect the innocent by fighting an enemy army comprised of his own cousins, friends, and teachers? The ethical codes of ancient India implore Arjuna to do his duty as the leading warrior of his time—to protect the innocent from evil—and yet, these very same codes forbid a warrior from killing family, friends, and especially one's


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teacher, one's beloved *guru*. Indeed, one of the important messages of the *Gītā* is that there will always be irresolvable ethical conflicts in this world, and, therefore, the *Gītā* does not attempt to resolve the ethical dilemma that befalls Arjuna, at least not directly. Rather, it points to something deeper.

This great text of Indian spirituality immediately establishes the existential challenge or tension that faces every human being. We all struggle, each in our particular ways, to transform this precarious, painful, and difficult world into a meaningful one. The first two compound phrases of the *Gītā*'s very first verse immediately engage this existential tension: *dharma-kṣetre* and *kuru-kṣetre*. This world of human interaction, *kṣetra*, is a place where we have an opportunity to practice the righteous life, the godly life, or *dharma*, i.e., a life promoting true happiness in relation to our worldly duties and ultimate spiritual goals. Yet we find that opposing forces to this dharmic enterprise are constantly competing and prevailing. This oppositional force to *dharma* is expressed by the juxtaposed compound phrase *kuru-kṣetra*, since it was the opposing army of unrighteous and evil-minded Kurus with whom Arjuna was confronted. Like Arjuna, we find ourselves caught between dharmic and Kuru-like forces, i.e., between engaging in thought processes and activities that elevate our spirit, helping us cope with the oppositional forces that surround us, or engaging in activities that degrade the spirit and further embroil us in the perils of material existence. In short, doesn't each of us, like Arjuna, have our own battlefields to face in the world and within ourselves?

This existential tension is the axial core of the *Gītā*, the great symbolism embedded in its text. It is an exigent tension with which we are constantly confronted, but with a purpose, if we are capable of facing it, as Krishna revealed to Arjuna throughout their conversation. Without Krishna's words, Arjuna would have remained in his depression, overwhelmed with grief and unable to act. Through Krishna's guidance, the conflict depicted in the *Gītā* pointed Arjuna toward the search for a more elevated state of consciousness, to a state of transcendence, and further, to the development of pure devotional love for God in *bhakti*. Once a soul has attained these states, according to the message of the *Gītā*, one is then capable of returning to the struggles of this world, as Arjuna did, with all of its seemingly irresolvable and painful ethical dilemmas, to fight on the battlefield with newly gained strength, and with a transcendent devotional vision. Thus the *Gītā* ultimately teaches us *that* we must, and *how* we must, as humans, "fight" our own existential battles.

The various voices brought together for this volume by its editor, Steven J. Rosen, explore several dimensions of this "fight." The reader will discover intriguing and reflective discussions concerning numerous aspects of violence and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, bringing out, in particular, three distinct layers of meaning from within the text, revealing its inexhaustible symbolic power as one of the truly great pieces of literature the world has known. These three layers reflect that which is essential for the structure of metaphorical meaning in traditional Indian poetics, as the *Bhagavad Gītā* is, in the original Sanskrit, epic poetry. The first layer is the ostensive, literal level, the second embodies the more subtle, suggestive meaning, and the third presents its deepest aspect. These three essential layers could be briefly characterized, respectively, as (1) the socio-political understanding, (2) the ethical-philosophical understanding, and (3) the metaphysical-theological understanding. Consistent with the structure of a truly powerful symbol, all three layers of meaning are constituent, and this volume beautifully weaves these layers together in relation to its theme, in order to offer the reader a rich entrance into the profundity and depth of the *Gītā's* message.

This volume addresses the first layer by focusing on the greater context of the *Bhagavad Gītā* narrative: Arjuna and his army are justified in going into battle because the enemy, the Kurus, represents evil through its inhumane and tyrannical regime. Arjuna and the Pāṇḍavas are obliged to put an end to the oppressive rule of the Kurus and to protect innocent citizens. The second layer is presented throughout the *Gītā*, in which a profound ethical model is developed for humans. Nonviolence is a virtue that is promoted, along with other saintly qualities, for one who is striving for or has attained realization of the higher self. The third layer represents the *Gītā*'s message at the deepest level: The battle that is about to ensue is not just any war—in fact, due to the explicit personal presence of God himself, it is unique even among "holy wars." It is a divine arrangement by the supreme Lord, Krishna, who urges Arjuna to take up the highest spiritual values that ultimately resolve the tensions between the first two layers, viz., those of worldly duties and ethical imperatives. The worldly, philosophical, and divine dimensions of this theme of violence and the *Bhagavad Gītā* are thus all focused upon in this book.

This is the second publication of the Indic Heritage Series of the newly formed Deepak Heritage Books (an imprint of the established A. Deepak Publishing), and, in many ways, it is an auspicious beginning for the series. Whether it be used as a text on the general subject of religion and violence

in the college classroom, or for the conscientious person concerned about the present world situation, or for the seeker who regularly studies the *Bhagavad Gītā*, readers of this volume will find a very thoughtful and comprehensive treatment of this subject, which has not until now received this kind of attention. This book represents the level and quality of serious scholarship that can be expected from this publisher, while it also presents a theme relevant to today's troubled world, a universal and timely theme drawn from one of the most loved, classical texts among the religious traditions of the world.

—Graham M. Schweig, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies,
Christopher Newport University

# INTRODUCTION

"My dear Krishna, as I look at family and friends, arrayed for battle,
My limbs feel weak and my mouth is dry.
My body trembles and my hair stands on end.
My skin burns and my faithful bow slips from my hands.
My mind causes me incredible grief.
O Krishna, as I look around me
I see only omens of evil."

—Arjuna, the *Bhagavad Gītā*

The events of September 11, 2001 are indelibly etched on the world's collective heart. For many, as the twin towers came crashing down, so did Western innocence, the illusion that the world is a safe place and that America is as loved by people of other lands as it is within our own borders. Inescapably, "violence and religion" are the new twin towers, replacing the old because the perpetrators claim that their crime was not only sanctioned by God but commanded by Him.

What is the relationship between violence and religion? This work seeks to answer this question, or at least explore it, but particularly in relation to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of the world's oldest and most enduring religious classics. The *Gītā*, as it is called, is significant in this regard, because it takes place on a battlefield, and because the traditions associated with it have considered the question of violence and religion for millennia.

The papers in this volume thus focus on the *Gītā* and the war alluded to in its pages. This introduction, as I see it, will serve to briefly introduce our readers to this most sacred of texts—its basic content and its long history of commentaries—and to the authors who contribute their meaningful words on these most consequential subjects.

To begin, *Gītā* means "song," and *Bhagavad* refers to "God, the possessor (*vat*) of all opulence (*bhaga*)." *Bhagavad Gītā*, therefore, is "The Song of the All-Opulent One." The text centers on the teachings of Lord Krishna, be-


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lieved to be God incarnate—the source of all other Divine manifestations.

The work comes to us in the form of a dialogue between Krishna and the princely warrior Arjuna, just before the onset of the devastating Mahābhārata war. Arjuna, putting aside his duty as a *kshatriya* (administrator/politician), decides not to fight. This decision is motivated by personal reasons: his kinsmen and teachers are in the opposing army.

Krishna, who has agreed to become the driver of Arjuna's chariot, sees His friend and devotee in illusion, paralyzed by the fear that he must kill his relatives and friends. Feeling compassion, Krishna eloquently reminds Arjuna of his immediate social duty (*varṇa-dharma*) as a warrior upon whom people are depending, and more importantly, of his religious duty (*sanātana-dharma*) as an eternal spiritual entity in relationship to God. The relevance and universality of Krishna's teachings transcend the immediate historical setting of Arjuna's battlefield dilemma.

The dialogue moves through a series of questions and answers that elucidate metaphysical concepts, such as the distinction between body and soul (matter and spirit), the principle of action without attachment, the virtues of discipline (*yoga*) and meditation, the role of knowledge (*jñāna*) and devotion (*bhakti*). Krishna teaches that true spiritual perfection does not lie in renunciation of the world, but in disciplined action (*karma-yoga*) that is to be performed without attachment to results (*karma-phala-saṅga*).

In the pages of the *Gītā,* Krishna shows Arjuna His mystical Universal form, which includes "everything in existence." When this is too much for Arjuna to bear, He shows him His more common four-armed Vishnu form and, finally, His original two-armed form. He explains His many manifestations, such as His all-pervading impersonal feature, His pantheistic Paramātma aspect, and Bhagavān, His Supreme Personality, revealing that, ultimately, His personal feature supercedes all the rest. Krishna explains the three modes of material nature—goodness, passion, and ignorance—showing how an understanding of these three qualities, along with knowledge of divine and demoniac natures, can lead to enlightenment. He tells Arjuna of the different kinds of liberation and the ultimacy of surrendering to Him with a heart of devotion.

Most of all, He describes *dharma,* a word usually translated as "duty" or "religiosity," but one that is in fact difficult to translate. Etymologically, it derives from the verbal root *dhri,* which means "to hold," and more specifically, "that which holds everything together." Things are held together by their essential qualities. *Dharma* is consequently seen as "the essence of a

given thing," or "a thing's inherent nature." The *dharma* of water is wetness. The *dharma* of honey is sweetness. And, according to Vaishnavism, or the theistic tradition that centers around the worship of Krishna, the *dharma* of the soul is service to God in love and devotion.

Although widely published and read as a separate text, the *Bhagavad Gītā* originally appears as a short episode in the Sixth Book of the *Mahābhārata* (*Bhishma-parvan*, chapters 23-40), which is one of India's great epics and, according to some, the longest poem ever written. The *Gītā* itself consists of 700 verses in eighteen chapters and is often referred to as "Gitopanishad," in that it follows the style and philosophical conclusions of the ancient Upanishads.

The *Gītā*'s depth of wisdom has inspired numerous commentaries. In fact, the *Gītā* is said to be the most commented upon book in the religious history of man. In India, practically every major teacher, dating back to antiquity, has contributed a commentary on the *Gītā*. Interestingly, even the *Mahābhārata* itself has its own built-in explanation of the *Gītā*, since Book Fourteen (the *Anugita*) is basically a summarization of the *Gītā*'s contents.

Long-established Indic texts, such as the *Varāha Purāṇa* and the *Padma Purāṇa*, include many Gitamahatmyas (verses glorifying the *Gītā*). In the 7th and 8th century C.E., teachers of the impersonalistic school, such as Bhaskara and Shankara, wrote what are now considered classic *Gītā* commentaries.

Important for Vaishnavas are the highly theistic commentaries of Yāmunāchārya, Rāmānujāchārya, Madhvāchārya (he actually wrote two: *Gita-bhashya* and *Gita-tatparya-nirnaya*), Keshava Bhatta of the Nimbarka school, Vallabhāchārya, Jayatīrtha, Vishvanāth Chakravartin, Baladeva Vidyābhūshana, Bhaktivinode Thākur, and A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak wrote a highly political commentary, as did Mahatma Gandhi, who also translated the *Gītā* into Gujarati. Sri Aurobindo also wrote an insightful, highly politicized commentary, and we will consider these two latter commentators in this book.

After the *Gītā* was translated into English for the first time (by Charles Wilkins in 1785), its popularity began to soar. Intellectuals among the Germans (Schlegel, Deussen, and Schopenhauer), Americans (Emerson and Thoreau), Englishmen (Max Mueller, who was English by adoption, and Aldous Huxley), Frenchmen (Romain Rolland), and Russians (Tolstoy) were greatly intrigued by the *Gītā*'s teaching, a teaching that continues to be expounded upon even today.

The subject of violence and religion in relation to the *Gītā*, though central to its underlying message, has not been the focus of any sustained study. The most considered analysis of this subject is the essay that appears at the conclusion of the translation by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, entitled, "The Gita and War." Though extremely valuable as far as it goes, this essay does not thoroughly analyze the ramifications and dimensions of the subject in depth. Our purpose here is to fill that lacuna by looking at the *Gītā* not only in terms of violence and religion but to contemporize the issue by exploring pertinent recent events and religious wars, in particular, hopefully elucidating why people who claim to find peace in worshipping God would perpetrate violence on others who do not share their faith.

When one contemplates the Crusades, the Inquisition, or, in a more contemporary setting, Waco, Bosnia, Heaven's Gate, the Catholics and the Protestants in northern Ireland, the Om Shinrikyo attacks in Japan, the bombing of American embassies in Africa, the constant battling between Hindus and Muslims—it makes one think twice about "believers" and their chosen path. How is it that the world's religious traditions, which are supposed to represent spiritual ideals such as love, peace, and mutual understanding, often seem to be instigators of hate and strife? The question is nicely phrased—and, to a degree, answered—by psychotherapist Russell Shorto in his book, *Saints and Madmen: Psychiatry Opens its Doors to Religion*:

> Is it possible that religious feeling—the feeling of oneness with others, of being swept up in the current of cosmic love and eternal goodness—has an element of violence in it? Of course it does. It is an avenue of human expression, and so will carry whatever baggage people choose to take with them as they travel down it. In the end, the "religion leads to violence" argument falters; you might just as easily say that education leads to violence since there is so much violence in schools. One might counter the argument by borrowing a slogan from the National Rifle Association: Religion doesn't kill, people do. (p. 42)

While I do not necessarily endorse this view when applied to the National Rifle Association, Shorto's point is well taken. Essential religious truths do not promote violence. Rather, people already predisposed to violence interpret these truths in their own distinct way.

Accordingly, a brief look at religious history reveals both martial and peaceloving angles on religion. There are Zionists who are willing to fight

for the state of Israel, and there are those like Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who took nonviolence to the point of vegetarianism. The same Islamic tradition that promotes *Jihad,* or holy war, also gave rise to Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a renowned pacifist. The very existence of someone like Oliver Cromwell, who through military means labored to make England a Christian nation, would lead one to believe that Christianity is a religion that favors violence; but peace advocate George Fox, founder of the Quakers in England and North America, would lead one to believe otherwise. Religion has brought forth the Prince of Peace, Jesus, and personalities such as Gandhi and Mother Teresa. It is also true that most "religious" wars have been fought as much for political and economic reasons as for spiritual ones. Therefore, it seems reasonable to evaluate a given religion on its own spiritual merits, not on the basis of those who have used it to endorse war or violence.

To me, just as man is made of an inner soul (the real Self) and an outer covering (the body), religion seems to have both internal and external dimensions. The internal aspect to religion is the esoterica, the mystical traditions associated with every major religion. This is the heart of religious practice, and it runs counter to superficiality—the kind of superficiality that leads to an "us and them" mentality, the kind of mentality that leads to war. One rarely sees religious wars being fought by Christian mystics, Kabbalists, Sufis, Vaishnavas, and so on—though, I am sure, there are exceptions. More commonly, however, wars are fought by those who embrace external interpretations of religion, or those who come to identify religion only in terms of its outer shell. Such adherents may even be well-meaning, sincere, devout—but if they do not dig deep, if they do not absorb the mystical core of their tradition, they will likely perceive its surface teaching only, which necessarily discounts the value of other faiths.

Nonsectarianism, which is the hallmark quality of every major religion's mystical tradition, allows for peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding. It asks for pluralism and inclusivism—ideas that stem from the realization that we are all God's children, even if we choose to worship in ways that are alien to our neighbors. It is only such a broad and far-reaching vision that will put an end to the kind of religious violence seen on September 11.

I do not mean to be simplistic. I fully accept that there are complex reasons why a religionist may opt for violence, and that he or she may have legitimate reasons for doing so. My own essay in this volume shows that I am not an extremist when it comes to pacifism, though, I will admit, I com-

promise that principle only in the most extreme circumstances. The battle depicted in the *Mahābhārata* is one such circumstance—I do believe that the Pāṇḍavas, the heroes of the war in question, had legitmate reasons to fight the Kauravas, the "bad guys" in the story. To my understanding, the battle was fought not to establish "my religion" as opposed to "your religion," but, rather, for larger issues involving protection of the innocent and the abolition of a tyrannical regime.

In regard to recent events, America's foreign policy may be as much to blame as is a radical reading of the Islamic faith. Some social commentators say that Muslims in the Middle East are more hateful of "Western Imperialists" than are Muslims in other parts of the world. They thus try to reduce the issue to class distinctions. Some opt for the well-worn arguments of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, indicating that there are, no doubt, many sociological and political issues at play. But if we consider the horror of the World Trade Towers and the earlier, if overshadowed, destruction of the two Buddhist monuments in the Afghan desert—also perpetrated by bin Laden's Taliban—we see not the work of errant religionists but simply of evil men.

The destruction of the two Buddhas is particularly telling: Buddhism is not a symbol of Western Imperialism—it is not Western at all. Buddhism does not cause sociological disturbance for Islam, or poverty for its practitioners. Neither is it a symbol of colonialism. Rather, the destruction of these monuments lays bare the Taliban's intolerance for other religions in general and their envy for the achievements of great civilizations. Thus, bin Laden's brand of Islam is politely called "fundamentalist" or "radical" but, in truth, it is not Islam at all.

The word "Islam" is related to *salam,* which is the Arabic word for "peace." Muslims are duty-bound to embrace peaceful relations and are called upon to fight only when they are threatened, in self-defense, and then only under the most extreme conditions. But this is all discussed in the pages that follow. The *Gītā* will be illuminated not only in relation to its own tradition but, in several of the papers presented here, to Islam and the events of September 11.

***

The volume begins with my own paper, which is based on a literalistic reading of the *Gītā.* I argue that the Pāṇḍavas had legitimate political and socio-

logical reasons to engage in war and, although the *Gītā*'s basic message is one of peace, its overriding teaching is that one should do whatever is required in the service of the Lord, even if it means battling to the death with those who are unrighteous. This, of course, leads to thorny theological questions: Does one ever have a right to kill, and would God ever sanction such behavior? Isn't it easy to misinterpret or abuse the idea of killing on God's behalf, engaging instead in bloodthirsty battle for selfish and nonreligious reasons? Have not bin Laden and others throughout history claimed that they were fighting on the Lord's behalf? Such questions are briefly explored in my paper and more thoroughly throughout this work.

My literalist reading of the *Gītā* is supported by **Arvind Sharma** (Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University, Canada), one of the world's leading *Bhagavad Gītā* scholars, who looks at Kurukshetra, the land area where the *Gītā*'s battle took place, and discusses it in terms of how it was understood in classical literature—that is to say, as a specific geographical location. He further discusses Kurukshetra from the viewpoint of later commentators such as Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi. This, of course, will prepare the reader for the next three papers, one by **Michel Danino** (a prominent scholarly follower of Aurobindo), which focuses on a militaristic if also spiritual reading of the text, and two by well-known Gandhi scholars, **Bradley Clough** (Bard College, New York), who offers in his essay historical background on Gandhi's nonviolent interpretation of the *Gītā,* and **Nicholas Sutton** (University of Birmingham, UK.), whose more conceptual article fleshes out Gandhi's dosctrine of *ahiṁsā* as a necessary component of the *Gītā*'s teaching.

After this, **Patrick Olivelle** (University of Texas) looks at India's social system by referring to Kathā and Dharma literature, exploring the reasons why one might commit violence in the name of religion, particularly an administrative officer in ancient India, like Arjuna. Olivelle shows the significance of caste distinctions in relation to warriors and brahmins, and how such distinctions might impact on the question of violence and the *Gītā*. **Ramesh Rao** (Truman State University, Missouri) then brings the study up to date by looking at how writers of the modern era still use the *Gītā* to support both war and peace. This is followed by the work of **Hector Avalos** (Iowa State University), who takes a deep look at the violence found in the pages of the Bible, showing how it correlates—and sometimes differs—with that of the *Gītā*.

Going back to original sources, **Chris Chapple** (Loyola Marymount Uni-

versity, Los Angeles) offers the volume a translation from the *Mahābhārata*—an English rendering of the Sanskrit. He focuses on a short episode in the epic that discusses *ahiṁsā,* not only in terms of peace and social harmony but also in terms of its most far-reaching dimensions, including that of vegetarianism.

This leads to an important paper that is central to the subject under discussion: **William Jackson** (Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis) looks at the *Koran* (also spelled *Qur'an*) in relation to the *Gītā,* and the impact that both books have had on their adherents' views of love and hate. He relates this to the contemporary discourse on bin Laden, i.e., the militaristic/fundamentalist reading of Islam, and how it differs from an inner reading of the same religion. **Swami Tripurari** (a leading scholar in the tradition from which the *Gītā* comes) closes the book with a spiritual perspective on the *Gita*'s message in regard to violence, and attempts to harmonize the *Gītā*'s many divergent interpretations.

A brief note on style and content: The reader will notice that the basic narrative of the *Gītā* is repeated in nearly every paper in this volume. Please read each retelling carefully, as diverse and subtle nuances are added each time, and a deeper familiarity with the story naturally results from such readings. On a separate note, I have allowed each writer the freedom to express his findings and research in the style with which he is most familiar. That is to say, as editor, I have not tried to make each paper consistent in terms of diacritics, italics, spelling, endnotes, bibliography, superscript, and so on. Rather, according to the particular discipline, training, and inclination of each author, I have encouraged them to write in the way in which they are most comfortable. The result, I think, is a flowing, natural and easy-to-read volume.

—Steven J. Rosen
New York, March, 2002

# KURUKSHETRA IN CONTEXT: AN ANALYSIS OF VIOLENCE IN THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*

Steven J. Rosen

"To win without fighting is best—though not always possible."
—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Violence in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is a complex subject. On the one hand, the text clearly involves the mandate to fight, as Supreme Lord Krishna instructs His devotee and friend, the archer-warrior Arjuna, to engage in battle. On the other hand, the teaching of *ahiṁsā*, "nonviolence," is also integral to the text. As a result of this disparity, *Gītā* commentators have historically espoused both hawk and dove perspectives.[1] These conflicting ideas have led generations of readers to wonder if the *Gītā* indeed promotes war or peace. In this paper, then, I will attempt to resolve a conflict about a conflict.

The *Gītā*'s "conflict" is poignantly summarized by Professor Arvind Sharma, author of *The Hindu Gītā* and one of the world's leading academic authorities on the text:

> The force of this contradiction can be seen from the fact that Mahatma Gandhi pitted himself non-violently against the British on the strength of the *Bhagavadgītā*, with which he fought the Indian Penal Code, and N. Godse drew his inspiration to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi from the self-same *Gītā* and was hanged under the Indian Penal Code. Thus Gandhi and Godse personify the ethical dilemma of the *Gītā*.[2]


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Interestingly, the *Gītā* itself is not a war story; it is a philosophical poem that focuses on the nature of reality and the spiritual basis of material existence. Even the actual battle, which occurs later in the *Mahābhārata* (the 110,000-line Sanskrit epic in which the *Gītā* is embedded), is described after the *Gītā* comes to a close. To be accurate, in the *Gītā*'s Eleventh Chapter, Arjuna is given a mystical vision of the war that is yet to come: "All the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra along with their allied kings and Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karna—and our chief soldiers also—are rushing into Your fearful mouths. And some I see trapped with heads between Your teeth." (11.26-27) Here, the context of the *Gītā* seems clearly martial, and Arjuna is being urged to fight an actual war. As Krishna says (11.34) "Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Jayadratha, Karṇa and the other great warriors have already been destroyed by Me. Therefore, kill them and do not be disturbed. Simply fight, and you will vanquish your enemies in battle."

That being said, the "violence" of the *Gītā* centers on conquering our own lower self. We must rise beyond our conditioning by gaining mastery over our mind and senses, the *Gītā* tells us. And we must do this with all the attributes afforded us by our higher nature. Only then will we be able to see beyond the illusions of material existence and penetrate the higher reality of *bhakti*, or devotion for God. As the *Gītā* says, "One must liberate himself with the help of his mind—not degrade himself. The mind is the friend of the conditioned soul, but it can be his enemy as well. For the person who has conquered the mind, it is the best of friends. But for one who has failed to do so, it will remain the greatest enemy." (6.5-6) The only sword the *Gītā* asks us to raise, then, is the one used to slash our own conditioning.

In fact, the *Gītā* makes it a point to praise harmlessness (*ahiṁsā*) throughout its pages. In 10.4-5, *ahiṁsā* is glorified as a quality created directly by Krishna; in 13.8-12, it is described as knowledge as opposed to ignorance; in 16.2-3 it is a characteristic of divine nature, as opposed to the demoniac; and in 17.14 it is lauded as a desirable austerity of the body. Krishna augments this nonmartial teaching by saying that one should see all living beings as nondifferent. He explains (in 5.18) that the truly enlightened person is *paṇḍita sama-darśi*, or "a wise person who sees everyone equally." If someone sees all beings as equal, how does he or she see them as enemies, or as someone in an opposing army? Many followers of the *Gītā* take *ahiṁsā* to the point of vegetarianism—such persons would not even kill animals, much less humans.

For reasons such as these, many have chosen to see in the *Gītā* a mes-

sage of peace, saying that the violence alluded to in its pages is merely a backdrop for a higher truth; the *Gītā* itself rejects violence, they say, and the *Mahābhārata* (*Anushasana-parvan* 116.41) even praises *ahiṁsā* as the greatest of duties (*ahiṁsā paro dharmo*).

Accordingly, a good number of peace advocates—from Schweitzer to Einstein, from Huxley to Whitman—have lauded the sacred text as the best of books. Some examples:

> "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial."
>
> —Henry David Thoreau

> "I owed a magnificent day to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us."
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson

> "The *Gita* is not a justification of war, nor does it propound a war-making mystique…Arjuna has an instinctive repugnance for war, and that is the chief reason why war is chosen as the example of the most repellant kind of duty. The *Gita* is saying that even in what appears to be most 'unspiritual' one can act with pure intentions and thus be guided by Krishna consciousness. This consciousness itself will impose the most strict limitations on one's use of violence because that use will not be directed by one's own selfish interests, still less by cruelty, sadism, and mere blood lust."
>
> —Thomas Merton

And yet the *Gītā* not only alludes to war but supports it—Krishna encourages Arjuna to fight and to kill vast numbers of highly qualified soldiers. It is not surprising, therefore, that some see in the *Gītā* a martial doctrine of self-defense, one that eclipses the text's many references to harmlessness.

Others have attempted to explain the *Gītā*'s war by turning to allegory. Gandhi, for example, theorized that the *Gītā* is not about historical war but rather connotes the battle that goes on in each individual heart. Deriving his interpretation from the Theosophical Society, most notably the works of Subba Row, William Q. Judge, and Annie Besant, who were among that

Society's earliest members, Gandhi was able to accept the scripture of his motherland in a way that supported his doctrine of nonviolence. Others have similarly deconstructed the *Gītā* as metaphor in innumerable ways, comparing Arjuna to Everyman, or the five Pāṇḍavas—the heroes of the *Gītā*—to the five senses, ad infinitum.[3]

To understand why some choose to read the ancient text metaphorically, we need look no further than the *Gītā*'s first verse, where Kurukshetra (the battlefield on which the *Gītā* is originally spoken) is referred to as "Dharmakṣetra," the field of dharma, of duty and righteousness. The implication is that the *Gītā*'s teaching transcends its battlefield surroundings. The conflict portrayed in the *Gītā* involves eternal dichotomies: justice and injustice, good and evil, reality and illusion, matter and spirit. And this is all true enough. But it is likely that the allegory stops there. Though some traditional commentaries give credence to allegorical interpretations of the *Gītā*[4]—saying that they add perspectives that illuminate inner teachings—these interpretations are considered subservient to a literal understanding. The allegorical version never stands on its own. Besides, even when taken as an allegory, the *Gītā*'s militaristic imagery is still associated with violence, and a war of astounding proportions still ensues in the *Mahābhārata,* where actual combat is an integral part of the story.

This paper will argue that real resolution lies in a literal interpretation, in an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the battle—in the reason behind the violence. *Gītā* scholar Mahesh Kumar Sharan has thus rightly pointed out that "because people do not realize the circumstances under which the *Gītā* was spoken, and take it as a book of isolated teachings...they commit the grievous mistake of saying that it inculcates manslaughter."[5] Sharan goes on to suggest that one must understand the *Gītā* by understanding its context.

This being so, I will now proceed with a brief overview of the story of the *Mahābhārata,* a story that is itself multi-faceted and difficult to understand. I then analyze whether it was legitimate for Arjuna, the hero of the *Gītā,* to engage in warfare. This includes an analysis of *kṣatriya-dharma* (the duty of the warrior class in ancient India), as well as an exploration of the "just war" concept in the world's major religious traditions—peripheral subjects that will, hopefully, shed light on the larger but related issue of violence and religion. I conclude by summarizing the *Gītā*'s essential teachings and by reassessing the subject of violence in the *Bhagavad Gītā* in light of all that has been discussed up to that point. By the end of the paper, it is hoped,

the reader will have sufficient background to appreciate the complexity and overall meaning of violence in this most sacred of texts.

## The Battlefield Context

*Bhagavad Gītā* is a text with a definite context. It consists of eighteen chapters that appear in the middle of the *Mahābhārata* (*Bhīṣma-parvan*, chapters 23 to 40)—one of the longest poems ever written, nearly three times the size of the Judaeo-Christian Bible. In a sense, looking at the *Gītā* without reference to the larger epic is like walking into a room when someone is halfway through telling a story. For example, in the *Gītā*, Krishna advances basically four arguments in an attempt to convince Arjuna to fight. He tells him that avoiding the war would be "unbecoming," or "cowardly," and that it would be good for him to overcome this "petty weakness of heart," for his own sake and for others (2.2-3); Krishna also reminds him that the body is temporary, that the real self is the eternal soul—an entity that cannot be killed—and so he should not hesitate to engage in battle with the opposing army (2.13, 19-20); he is a warrior (*kṣatriya*) by nature and training, Krishna tells him, and he voluntarily chose this vocation. By not fighting, he would lose his reputation (2.33, 34). Moreover, if he avoids the battle, in which so many are depending upon him, he would be acting sinfully (2.31, 33).

To properly understand each of these four arguments, one must have knowledge of the *Mahābhārata*: It is only "weakness of heart" to avoid battle when a battle is waged for legitimate reasons. In other words, it would be "weakness of heart" for an administrative officer like Arjuna to avoid this particular battle because, as described in the *Mahābhārata*, the Kauravas, the opposing army, caused havoc in society and thus provoked Arjuna's retaliation, as we shall see. To consider Krishna's second argument, the souls of Arjuna's opponents may be eternal—as are all souls—but why should Arjuna kill these particular people? Again, Krishna is referring to information that can be found in the *Mahābhārata*. Arjuna may be a warrior, but does this mean that he should engage in any fight, just for the sake of fighting? Why should he take part in this particular war? These questions are resolved in the broader context of the *Mahābhārata*. Finally, Arjuna's reputation only becomes questionable if he avoids a war that is righteous, and the righteousness of the war is upheld in the larger epic. Thus, any attempt to unravel the truth behind violence in the *Gītā* will fall short without recourse to the story behind the story.

This overarching tale, the *Mahābhārata*, focuses on a deep-rooted conflict involving an important political family of the period. This family consisted of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, two groups of feuding cousins. King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the father of the Kauravas, was congenitally blind. Thus, the throne that would have been his, was instead given to his younger brother Pāṇḍu, father of the Pāṇḍavas. Dhṛtarāṣṭra resented Pāṇḍu for gaining the throne, and never forgave him.

After Pāṇḍu's early death, Dhṛtarāṣṭra received at his court Pāṇḍu's five sons, the Pāṇḍavas (Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula, and Sahadeva), and raised them with his own boys, the eldest of whom was Duryodhana.[6] Yudhiṣṭhira, as Pāṇḍu's eldest, was the rightful heir to the throne. This infuriated Dhṛtarāṣṭra: It was difficult enough to relinquish the throne to Pāṇḍu. But now, to worsen the situation, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son, Duryodhana, would have to abdicate the throne to the Pāṇḍavas.

All the boys were trained as warriors (*kṣatriya*) according to ancient standards of military excellence and chivalry that are today all but lost. But this training was not always used for the best purposes. Even when the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas were still children, rivalry developed between them. This was fueled by Duryodhana's envy of the Pāṇḍavas and their rightful place as leaders of the kingdom. The Kauravas became devious; the Pāṇḍavas, virtuous. As they grew older, the Kauravas used their military might for selfish reasons, while the Pāṇḍavas were spiritual-minded political leaders, and thus greatly loved. Still, Dhṛtarāṣṭra naturally favored his own boys, even though it was clear that the Pāṇḍavas were better suited to rule the kingdom, and he successfully plotted to enthrone his eldest son, Duryodhana.

The sons of Pāṇḍu were eventually given territory of their own, where they erected a great city. However, Duryodhana was jealous, and he developed a plan to take the territory of the Pāṇḍavas by dubious means: He rigged a game of dice in which the eldest son of Pāṇḍu, Yudhiṣṭhira, was sure to lose. The plot succeeded, Yudhiṣṭhira lost his kingdom, and the Pāṇḍavas were sent into exile for thirteen years.

As true *kṣatriyas* of their day, the Pāṇḍavas honored their defeat, even though they were cheated, and entered the forest, believing they would regain their kingdom upon their return. But after the thirteen years, Duryodhana denied them the kingdom that was rightfully theirs. They then asked for five small villages, because, as *kṣatriyas*, it was their inclination and duty to rule. Their livelihood depended on it as well.

Duryodhana, however, was cruel. "If they want as much land as fits under

a pin," he sneered, "they will have to fight for it." Thus, by his humiliating response and his refusal to grant them even small villages, Duryodhana instigated what was to become a devastating battle.

By this time, the Kauravas had become infamous as exploitative kings. In contrast to the five sons of Pāṇḍu, whom the *Mahābhārata* describes as incarnations of godly personalities (*Ādi-parvan* 109.3), Duryodhana is seen as the Kali Puruṣa—the demon Kali in human form (*Ādi* 61.80). In other words, he was the embodiment of quarrel and hypocrisy, of everything evil in society. As a group, Duryodhana and his brothers embodied "the brood of ego-centric desires and passions like lust, greed, hatred, anger, envy, pride, vanity, and so on, to which the empirical ego is firmly attached and to which it clings desperately."[7] Their gross mistreatment of the Pāṇḍavas—and of innocent citizens—increased with the years.

The Kauravas were "evil-doers" by any standard. From the Vedic point of view, they were guilty of six acts for which lethal retaliation is justified: (1) administering poison, (2) setting fire to another's home, (3) stealing, (4) occupying another's land, (5) kidnapping another's wife, and (6) attacking with a deadly weapon. Duryodhana had fed Bhīma a poisoned cake in one of several attempts to kill him; he had arranged for a house made of lacquer to be built for the Pāṇḍavas and then had it set ablaze while they and their mother were still inside; the Kauravas stole the Pāṇḍavas' land on several occasions; they kidnapped their wife Draupadī; and now, with war pending, they were about to attack them with the most lethal of weapons. Such aggressors, or criminals (*ātatāyi*), say Vedic texts, should be killed by protectors of the righteous. *Manu-saṁhitā* 8.350-1 says: "Whether he be a teacher…an old man, or a much learned brahmin, if he comes as a criminal (*ātatāyi*) in any of the above six ways, a *kṣatriya* should kill him.…There is no sin in killing one so heartless." In fact, tradition asserts that "such a criminal is in reality killing himself by his own outrageous behavior."

Again, the Pāṇḍavas were not the exclusive target of the Kauravas' hatred. As the Kauravas' unjust reign grew, they wreaked havoc throughout the country, causing hardship for all their subjects. So the Pāṇḍavas' retaliation was not a vendetta but an attempt to save their fellow man. Professor Pandit Rajmani Tigunait paraphrases the *Mahābhārata* when he summarizes the reign of the Kauravas during the Pāṇḍava exile:

> During this period of exile, the false king and his sons gathered an enormous military force, stockpiled weapons, and formed alliances

with neighboring countries. Their subjects were miserable—taxes were heavy, with every penny used to increase the strength of the army; corruption was rampant, and women and children were not protected. People were praying for the rightful king and his four brothers to return from exile. When they did, the rightful king sent an emissary to the court with a proposal for getting his kingdom back. The emissary was mistreated and the proposal spurned.[8]

It should be underlined that the Pāṇḍavas preferred peace—and the *Mahābhārata* carefully records this important fact. Indeed, the *Udyoga-parvan*—interestingly, "the Book of Effort," highlighting the intense endeavor made by the Pāṇḍavas to avoid the war—cites several instances in which both Krishna and the Pāṇḍavas pleaded for an end to the senselessness that lay before them. But all such requests, heartfelt though they were, fell on deaf ears.

Queen Draupadī insisted on war—she sought revenge for the injustices brought upon her husband, Yudhiṣṭhira. Krishna, however, rebuked her, saying that war should never be waged for revenge, personal insults, or venting anger. (See *Udyoga-parvan*) At this point, it becomes evident that far from endorsing war, the heroes of the *Mahābhārata* go to great pains to avoid it, although, as it turns out, war became inevitable.

That the Pāṇḍavas clearly preferred a nonviolent alternative is eloquently expressed by Arjuna's brother, Yudhiṣṭhira (*Udyoga-parvan* 70.55-58):

> War is evil in any guise. What killer is not slain in return? To those who die on the battlefield, victory and defeat are equal....the surviver is also a loser: As time goes on, someone will perhaps kill one of his loved ones, as karma decrees, or he will otherwise regret his violent acts....It is the righteous warriors, truly noble and with a mood of compassion, who are generally killed in war. And the lesser men escape. There is naturally remorse after the killing of others, especially in the hearts of warriors who know the value of life. Only pain can come from battle.

Nonetheless, without any other recourse, battle ensued.

Lord Krishna, known by the cousins as God incarnate, was acting as the leader of the Yādavas from Dwaraka, a magnificent city on India's western coast. He offered Himself and His entire army to the cause of the upcoming battle. But both parties would have to choose one or the other. Krishna stipulated that He would not engage in battle—the side that chose Him would have to be content with his moral support. He would also act as a

charioteer. The opposing side would have His nearly countless legions of warriors, all highly trained.

Materialistic Duryodhana quickly chose the armed battalions. The righteous Pāṇḍavas, on the other hand, asked for Krishna alone, confident that God's grace is more significant than all material facility. Krishna, the *Mahābhārata* tells us, in letting the two sides choose Him or His army, shows that God is unbiased; if one turns to Him, to whatever degree, He reciprocates accordingly.

The respective choices made here by the Pāṇḍavas and by Duryodhana reveal the actual reason for the *Mahābhārata* war: It was not about the land denied to the Pāṇḍavas but rather about establishing a God-conscious kingdom. As we have seen, God-consciousness was the furthest thing from Duryodhana's mind. While the Pāṇḍavas wanted to rule on Krishna's behalf, the Kauravas did not. Indologist Angelika Malinar explains the situation:

> As to the immediate context of the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Udyoga-parvan* presents in a sequence of debates the pros and cons of war, of Yudhiṣṭhira's entitlement for kingship and Duryodhana's claim to establish himself as an absolute monarch. He and his allies furnish sophisticated arguments in order to legitimize their claims for an 'absolute' government, centered on the interests of the king. Duryodhana intends to establish his supremacy over the three worlds, inclusive of gods and demons, and does not hesitate, against the warnings of those in authority…to sacrifice the traditional family ties and the code of kinship for his own self-interest. In his programmatic speech in the *Mahābhārata* (5.60) he presents himself as a god-king and rejects all obligations with regard to the traditional gods as well as to ascetic, i.e., self-restrictive, values.[9]

To defend the righteous and to establish a God-conscious kingdom, then, the Pāṇḍavas had no alternative but to engage in battle. Thus, with Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer, the *Bhagavad Gītā* begins. Both armies are arrayed and ready for combat. But before the fighting begins, Krishna pulls Arjuna's chariot into the middle of the battlefield, where the fabled bowman sees friends, relatives, and countrymen on both sides. Arjuna becomes paralyzed with fear. He has second thoughts about committing to the massive war that lies ahead, in which no one will really be the winner. And Krishna begins to speak, or, rather, to sing. (*Bhagavad Gītā* literally means "the Song of God.")

South Asian scholar Barbara Powell, author of *Windows into the Infinite: A Guide to the Hindu Scriptures,* perceptively summarizes this song, bringing special attention to the subject of violence:

> Initially one might expect Kṛṣṇa to applaud Arjuna's decision [not to fight]. After all, by embracing nonviolence he appears to have assumed a morally superior stance. But Kṛṣṇa shows a deeper truth. He will surprise us.
>
> "Coward!" He reprimands. "Such behavior is unfitting to a man of your station. Get out there and fight!"
>
> In many other places in the text, Kṛṣṇa will extol gentleness and nonviolence, even passivity. If there's one generalization we can make about the *Gītā,* it's that it embraces diversity. No one occupation, standard of conduct or spiritual path is appropriate for everyone. Different people require different paths. Arjuna is a *kṣatriya,* a soldier by profession, and it is his moral and spiritual imperative to attend to the duties, the dharma, of that profession. Were Arjuna a priest, a spice merchant, or a housewife, Kṛṣṇa would have given him very different advice, for violence is never acceptable for these people. But the question of war and peace is not the issue here at all. The issue is action and inaction. If Kṛṣṇa were talking to an exhausted mother with five screaming children all needing her attention at once, she might tell Him, "Kṛṣṇa, I can't face it. There's no way I can be a mom today." His reply would be, "Yes you can. In fact, you must. It's your duty. Get in there and fight!" The war of Kurukṣetra...provides a context in which to examine the subtler truths of life and death, liberation and bondage. The battlefield represents life in the world, with all its perils, temptations, and vicissitudes. Each day we have new battles to fight, the greatest of all being the battle against our own lower natures, the struggle for spiritual emancipation.[10]

Still, according to the *Mahābhārata,* it must be admitted that Arjuna was literally facing warfare, and the teachings of the *Gītā* were directed, first and foremost, to him.

## Who is Arjuna?

One step toward understanding violence in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is to understand its main protagonist, Arjuna, who a soldier, or a *kṣatriya.* The etymolo-

gy of the word is itself revealing: *kṣat* means "hurt," and *trayate* means "to give protection." By this definition, a *kṣatriya* is one who protects from harm or violence—not someone who instigates it.

Arjuna was part of the ancient Varṇa society, which is mentioned in the *Gītā* (4.13). It is comprised of four groups, (1) priests and intellectuals, (2) political and military leaders, (3) farmers and merchants, and (4) the proletariat, including artisans—four natural social divisions found in one form or another in any given society. In India, these four are known as *brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya,* and *śūdra,* respectively. A similar social structure is mentioned by Plato in *The Republic,* though slaves take the place of *śūdras.* Many scholars say that the similarity is too great to be accidental—the connection, it is often thought, must have come through the Pythagoreans, whose teachings have much in common with that of ancient India.

Vedic texts describe Varṇa as a social system that accords with nature, emphasizing quality (*guṇa*) and work (*karma*)—taking into account each person's individual nature—not merely birth status. In this sense it is fundamentally different from the much later caste system, which divides society in a hierarchical way according to the family in which one is born. Using birth as a sole criterion for class distinction causes problems. The son of a priest or an intellectual, for example, is not necessarily inclined to the same kind of work as his father. Or, to give another example, imagine a talented artist trying to convince her daughter that she was born to paint, even though, despite all endeavor, the little girl is unable to draw a straight line. The point is straightforward: Simply because one is born in a particular family does not mean that one will inherit the qualitative traits of his or her parents. However, all individuals have some natural inclination (either from birth or later acquired) and should certainly be engaged in a way that allows the inclination to flourish. This is the Varṇa system.

It should also be pointed out that the Varṇa system was meant to be a form of yoga, or a way of uniting with God, and the saintly kings of Arjuna's time approached it in that way. They saw it as a type of *yajña,* or sacrifice, that was specific to one's psychophysical make-up—an opportunity to serve God in a way that is appropriate for the individual, whether a *brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya,* or *śūdra.* For a *kṣatriya* like Arjuna, battle becomes a religious sacrifice, a sacred rite. The *Mahābhārata* describes the *kṣatriya* arena of worship: His bow is his sacrificial stake, his bow-string the cord for tying the victims, his shafts are the small ladle and his sword the large one. His chariot is the altar and the blood he pours on the battlefield is the clarified butter.

His wrath is the fire of the sacrifice and the four steeds yoked to his vehicle are the four sacrificial priests (*hotri*). After pouring his own life-breath (*praṇa*) and that of his foes as libations upon the sacrificial fire of the battlefield, he becomes freed from sin, and secures a place for himself in heaven (*svargaloka*).[11] Though this may sound dangerously close to the kind of senseless religious war with which we in the West have become uncomfortably familiar, *kṣatriyas* would only engage in battle as a matter of self-defense and protection of the innocent, a subject to which we will soon return.

For the ideal *kṣatriya,* the sacrifice of battle becomes a form of total renunciation (*tyāga; sannyāsa*) in which one puts one's own life on the line (*ātmayajña*). Arjuna, says the *Gītā,* knowing this full well, should not abandon his responsibilities nor pursue his own narrow interest, however noble or pacifistic it might seem at the moment. Instead, he must dedicate his life to the larger concern of human protection (*lokasaṁgraha*), undistracted by family ties and without attachment to the results of his actions. The sacrifice he performs then becomes an act of yoga due to the necessity of one-pointed focus, or meditation, on the task before him.

Consequently, in Arjuna's world, war was seen as the proper sacrifice for a warrior (*kṣatriya*), a sacrifice that potentially included the loss of one's life on the battlefield. It is this notion of unattached action (in contrast to the renunciation of action itself) that distinguishes the teaching of the *Gītā,* which elaborates on how all people can sacrifice their work to God, as opposed to sacrificing work altogether. Ultimately, all human activities—in any of the four Varṇas—could become a type of yoga, a sacrifice, provided that the fruits are dedicated to the pursuit of Divinity. This begins as Karma-yoga, or action on God's behalf, and, when imbued with devotion, becomes Bhakti-yoga.[12]

With this insight into *kṣatriya-dharma,* let us again look at Arjuna's particular predicament. Although a highly trained soldier, Arjuna does not want to fight. He shrinks from the act of killing. Given what we have just learned about Varṇa, a legitimate question arises: Is Arjuna an actual *kṣatriya?* After all, he argues in the *Gītā* against fighting. So, although he may have been raised as a *kṣatriya,* cultivating the qualities of a warrior from childhood, does he actually have what it takes to engage in battle? Is it in his skin? In his blood?

Although Arjuna, in this case, has an aversion to war, it can be shown that he is nonetheless a genuine *kṣatriya.* How so? If his repugnance to

the battle is merely a momentary weakness, a second thought, a hesitation to consider "Am I doing the right thing?," then Arjuna's status as a *kṣatryia* can still be legitimate. Despite one's natural inclination to a particular form of work, it is just as natural to reconsider one's course of action at a particular moment. Was this the case for Arjuna, or was he really something other than a *kṣatriya*?

To answer this with some certainty, we must, again, go back to the *Mahābhārata*. There, we learn that Arjuna is actually the son of Indra, the warrior-god of the Vedas (*Ādi-parvan* 114.21). Implicitly, he was born for combat. But, as we have learned, birth is not enough. So, the *Mahābhārata* goes further, stating that Arjuna not only studied under Droṇācārya, arguably the greatest warrior of his time, but he is described as Droṇa's greatest student, his protégé (*Ādi-parvan* 121). Arjuna stands out among his brothers as the most skillful of *kṣatriyas*—he enjoys the hunt, wins awards, and takes naturally to military life (*Ādi-parvan* 119). Arjuna feels that no other activity is as natural for him, and he lives the *kṣatriya*'s life with great determination and pride. Indra himself tells Arjuna: "No one in existence, even on higher planets, can vanquish you. Your talents are beyond measure—you are unbeatable, matchless in the game of war (*Araṇyaka-parvan* 165.2). And further, "No one who is living is worth a fraction of you as a soldier. Truly, the way of the *kṣatriya* is in your blood." (*Araṇyaka-parvan* 171.2-3) Later, in the *Gītā* (18.73), Arjuna himself admits that his hesitation in fighting was merely a temporary aberration, an illusion dispelled by Krishna's wise counsel.

Acting within the Varṇa system, then, Arjuna was clearly a *kṣatriya*, and to execute his *kṣatriya* responsibilities properly was his dharma, his service to man and God. As a sensitive human being, he naturally questioned the propriety of such an all-encompassing war. But he was definitely a fighter, a soldier, and wanted nothing else out of life. In the ancient Upanishads, *kṣatriyas* like Arjuna were compared to gardeners. It was understood that they were to take care of "the field" in ways that the common man could not, keeping the garden healthy by removing weeds and other plants that were detrimental to the overall health of the garden. As A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, one of the twentieth century's leading practitioner-scholars of Vaishnavism, writes:

> As in the paddy field the unnecessary plants are taken out, so it is expected from the very beginning of these topics [*Bhagavad-gītā*] that

> in the religious field of Kurukṣetra, where the father of religion, Srī Kṛṣṇa, was present, the unwanted plants like Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son Duryodhana and the other Kurus would be wiped out and the thoroughly religious persons, headed by Yudhiṣṭhira, would be established by the Lord. (13)

A *kṣatriya* is a defender, a protector—a person who will resort to physical means to cultivate the field of life. He is not violent, but, rather, he *protects* from violence, as stated earlier. There will always be violence in this world, and so there must always be protectors of the innocent. To this end, a *kṣatriya* is trained in the military arts. He is noble and chivalrous. But, if necessary, he will employ combative tactics. Because there are people who perform evil deeds, *kṣatriyas* such as Arjuna are needed. And when *kṣatriyas* fight according to fair standards of warfare, they serve an important function in society. A just war according to the Vedic system, then, is one of defense—it is never aggressive but rather serves humanity by protecting people and establishing God consciousness.

It should again be underlined that not everyone is a *kṣatriya,* and Arjuna's dilemma is specific to his circumstance—not everyone in his position should fight. A *brāhmaṇa,* for example, should not engage in warfare. Generally, a *brāhmaṇa* does not find himself in the midst of a battlefield, nor is he properly trained for engaging in battle. But a "born" warrior, like Arjuna, *must* fight. He would be sinful *not* to fight, and this is Krishna's main point. The truth of this statement is so obvious that Gandhi, who otherwise endorsed nonviolence in all circumstances, felt it necessary to say the following:

> Let us suppose that Arjuna flees the battlefield. Though his enemies are wicked people, are sinners, they are his relations and he cannot bring himself to kill them. If he leaves the field, what would happen to those vast numbers on his side? If Arjuna went away, leaving them behind, would the Kauravas have mercy on them? No. If he left the battle, the Pandava army would be simply annihilated. What, then, would be the plight of their wives and children?...Arjuna, therefore, had no choice but to fight.[14]

That said, it becomes obvious that sometimes fighting is necessary. The Pāṇḍavas did not want to engage in warfare, but they had no alternative. The Kauravas made life intolerable, not only for the Pāṇḍavas but for the mass of people. And if people suffer, *kṣatriyas* engage in battle. As the Irish

politician Edmund Burke writes, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Men such as the Pāṇḍavas would never let evil triumph.

## The Just War Doctrine

Some feel that violence is never justified and consequently they adopt a policy of pacifism, an ideal in which human life is not to be taken under any circumstances. The notion of pacifism invariably falls short, however, when one's life, values, and loved ones are threatened to extinction. In these instances, violence has utilitarian justification. Christian tradition provides a good example of this. For the first three centuries of Christian history, pacifism was the preferred stance of all who called themselves Christian. Then, in the fourth century, Christianity became a mainstream religion and had to address issues of self-defense and public order, at times with the force necessary to uphold those values. As a result, pacifism was replaced with the "just war" theory, which is based on the idea that pacifism is not absolute, and that there are other values that compete with the preservation of life. These values center around the principle of "justice," the implementation of which can sometimes require the sacrifice of life. Within this context, the principle of pacifism is seen as an ideal to be worked at, but is, nonetheless, one that must occasionally be sacrificed in the preservation of other values.

Originally, the just war concept was meant to minimize the use of force, limiting it to situations where a wrong could not be undone by any other means, and providing that the force used would cause the least harm to the fewest number of people. In due course of time, as history relates, the just war theory was exploited by religious fanatics, who used its utilitarian stance to wage wars in religion's name—if not always in religious spirit. As Professor Stephen L. Carter writes in *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*:

> Wars are fought by countries, for causes in which the leaders believe. Critics of religious participation in politics are fond of arguing that religion has been the cause of many wars in the past. Partly true—but only partly. The religious wars, almost always, were fought by princes and their armies for some tangible benefit, such as territory or trade routes. Religion was often a convenient excuse, but it was rarely the underlying purpose.[15]

In the Indic tradition, the just war doctrine is reminiscent of the Caturopāyas, "the four means," which include three methods of diplomacy that attempt to avoid war (the fourth and final alternative). If one observes the first three of these tactics and cannot find a peaceful solution, then war becomes inevitable and may even be deemed righteous (*dharmayuddha*). These "four means" are: (1) *sāma* (pacification, or praising your opponent with pleasing words); (2) *dāna* (the giving of a gift, such as land, in the spirit of reconciliation); (3) *bheda* (a thought-provoking threat leading to a peaceful alternative); and (4) *daṇḍa* (punishment, or war, which is only engaged in if the prior three attempts have failed). A righteous war, by this definition, is not necessarily religious but is based on principles of justice and self-defense, and is always engaged in as a last resort.

In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.1.37-46), Krishna's father Vasudeva, who was also Arjuna's uncle, employs Caturopāya in an attempt to pacify the notorious Kaṁsa, one of the demoniac kings of the period. He in fact manages to delay a major conflict in this way. In the West, Caturopāya can be seen in the Second World War: Britain and France followed the preliminary *upāyas* (such as gifting parts of Czechoslovakia and signing the Munich Pact with the Rome-Berlin Axis) before declaring war in 1939. For this reason, various Indian writers[16] have accepted retaliation against Hitler's regime as *dharmayuddha,* or a just war. In other words, there was no alternative but to fight. The Pāṇḍavas, too, it will be remembered, tried to find a peaceful solution before acquiescing to war.

Nonetheless, when the words "violence" and "religion" are mentioned in the same sentence, they naturally give rise to an emotional response, bringing to mind overzealous exploitation and abuse. Even if one admits that there may be some basis for righteous violence under the most extenuating circumstances, it is equally clear that unnecessary violence could be rationalized as religious duty. Such violence has already stained the pages of history. Words such as "Crusades" and "Inquisition" give thinking people reason to pause, evoking suspicion and distrust for religious institutions. This is because innocent and sincere people have been victimized in the name of God since the beginning of recorded time.

The Islamic *jihad* is a prime example. From its inception more than 1,300 years ago, Islam developed a reputation as a militant religion that favored conversion "by the sword." The new faith served to unify the violent Bedoun tribes of the Arabian peninsula, who for centuries had engaged in vicious warfare, but it merely substituted Bedoun bloodshed for that instigated by

the newly established religion. The early Muslims quickly conquered Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, and Persia. After this, they forged eastward to India, and then westward, to North Africa, Spain, and France, establishing their religion by force. Even in recent times, Shi'ite fundamentalists, among other Islamic factions, continue to massacre "unbelieving infidels" in the name of religion.

And yet the word *jihad* does not necessarily refer to physical battle and, originally, was more about the "inner struggle"—the struggle against one's own inner demons. *Jihad* actually has two components: the Greater Struggle, which is a battle with one's lower nature (similar to the battle alluded to in the *Bhagavad Gītā*), and the Lesser Struggle, which refers to overt violence, the kind that manifests in war and bloodshed. According to Muslim scholar Rabbia Terri Harris, the overt *jihad* must only be utilized if one is oppressed and/or unable to practice one's religion. A Muslim is called upon to engage in physical battle, she says, only as a last resort.[17] Even the Koran (2.190) tells us, "And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but be not an aggressor: God does not show His love toward those who aggress upon others, whomever they may be." Contrary to popular belief, then, one can legitimately engage in the Lesser Struggle, or the *jihad* of external warfare, only after nonviolent forms of resolution have been attempted, and in this sense it is similar to the just war concept in Christianity and the Caturopāya idea in Indian tradition.

Even a cursory study of Islam, however, reveals that the concept of *jihad* has been abused throughout the religion's brief history, as in the initial spreading of Islam cited earlier. This is due to superficial interpretation, which allows the concept to be used for exploitation and unnecessary violence. But does the abuse of a good concept imply that the concept has no proper utilization? Is there never a time when war might be properly waged? Might violence not sometimes be the lesser of two evils?

Gandhi, to again quote this well-known supporter of *ahiṁsā* ideals, writes that sometimes it is wise to see nonviolence in activities that may externally appear otherwise: "I have come to see that...there is sometimes nonviolence in violence. I had not fully realized the duty of restraining a drunkard from doing evil, or killing a dog in agony or one infected with rabies. In all such instances, violence is in fact nonviolence."[18]

Along these same lines, Indian historian S. Dasgupta asks (and answers) the following question: If a dangerous beast enters a cattle shed, should one kill the beast or let it destroy the valuable cattle? Kill the beast, he con-

cludes, for the principal objective is to maintain social order and the well-being of the people.[19] According to the *Gītā,* this principle supercedes any abstract notion of pacifism, which is often an extremist position that may result in more harm than good. Dasgupta further asks us to consider if it is "violent" to engage in acts of self-defense. Most people would make an allowance for such "violence." If a loved one's life is being threatened, too, it would be understandable to react with physical measures.

Clearly, "violence" is sometimes justifiable. True *ahiṁsā* might thus more accurately be defined as "nonaggression" as opposed to "nonviolence," for there are some situations where one may act "violently" but still hold true to the spirit of *ahiṁsā.* Gandhian peace marches and noncooperation theory could not put an end to the Holocaust or the Nazi regime. Buddhist nonviolence cannot rectify the situation in Tibet. People like Saddam Husein and Osama bin Laden will not be stopped with sweet words or good intentions. It was in just such an extreme situation, dealing with incorrigible, evil personages, that Arjuna and his brothers found themselves.

Nonviolence, of course, is a quality cherished by many—and especially by those who follow the *Bhagavad Gītā*—but it must be approached with practicality. Total nonviolence may be a diplomatic ideal, but it is never fully realized: With each breath, we unintentionally kill tens of thousands of microorganisms. As long as breathing is a part of life, such "violence" is unavoidable.

The just war theory is also unavoidable—it arises out of necessity—and its application, as we have shown, is found in civilized cultures throughout the world.

## The Most Just of Just Wars

Among all just wars, the most just would be that war in which God were personally present. Not in one's imagination, not by interpreting scripture, but literally, tangibly present. This is the claim of the *Mahābhārata*—that God was there, at Arjuna's side. No other religious tradition makes an even remotely similar claim. Thus, Lord Krishna's presence during Arjuna's specific battle sharply distinguishes the *Mahābhārata* war from war in general, even those purportedly fought for religious purposes. Moreover, unlike modern combatants, the five Pāṇḍavas were neither pietistic generals, religious fanatics, nor misguided victims. They were intimate servitors of the Lord, who fought for a God conscious kingdom and to defend the op-

pressed citizens of the Kaurava empire.

Devotees of God such as the Pāṇḍavas are by nature nonviolent in the deepest sense: In the normal course of events they refrain from hurting any living entity, and they strive to propagate knowledge that can release one from the painful cycle of birth and death. Yet devotees also understand that war, when fought for the right cause—the cause of God, and in self-defense for just reasons—has its place in the world.

Along these lines, it is interesting that Arjuna does not want to fight on his own behalf. Although the Kauravas have treated him and his brothers unfairly, to say the least—and caused havoc throughout the kingdom—he remains soft-hearted and wishes to forgive them. This is a devotee's natural demeanor, and Arjuna is thus seen as Krishna's perfect devotee, the ultimate Vaishnava. But he is especially seen as the ultimate Vaishnava because he goes further: Krishna, God, is personally telling him to fight, and, in obedience, he finally does so.

When one acts on God's behalf, one can become His instrument, serving His purposes. This is called the service of "agency." In the words of S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, scholar of Hindu Studies,

> Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to act as His agent. In other words, though the material accountability for discharging the responsibilities of his role as a warrior fell on Arjuna, the formal, and the ultimate, responsibility of Arjuna's actions belong[s] to Lord Kṛṣṇa....[T]he [divinely] detached individual...is not responsible for the consequences of his actions in two senses: (a) His responsibilities, if any, are not 'actor-responsibilities' but 'agent-responsibilities.' (b) He is not an 'actor,' too, since his Self is not invoked in the production of (desirable) consequences.[20]

To make this clear by using an analogy: If a man kills for his own purposes, as an independent agent, he is considered responsible for his actions and must himself suffer the consequences. But if he kills as a representative of the armed forces, his government is responsible for his actions. In other words, if one acts independently, one sows what one reaps. But if one acts as another's agent, the reaping is properly done by he or she who sponsors the act.

This, again, is not meant to encourage irresponsible violence "on God's behalf." When there are no options left, one may go to war according to the just war theory. The *Mahābhārata* war, especially, was fought according to sophisticated religious principles of fairness: "In the course of the battle,

if one fights with speech, he should be opposed by speech only. One who, for any reason, leaves the midst of the battle should not be killed. A warrior on a chariot may only be fought by a warrior who is also on a chariot. One must fight opponents in fair ways, and no one who does not wish to fight is to be so engaged." (*Bhīṣma-parvan* 1.28-32) The rules of the *Mahābhārata* battle are accurately summarized by *Gītā* expert Winthrop Sargeant:

> The great battle was supposed to be fought according to certain rules of knightly etiquette, which were, in fact, adhered to in the very beginning. Fighting was to take place only in daylight. After sunset, everybody mixed in friendship. Single combats were supposed to be only among equals. Anyone leaving the field or sitting in Yoga posture was supposed to be immune from attack. Anyone who surrendered was to be spared. Anyone momentarily disengaged was prohibited from attacking one already engaged....Animals were not to be killed unnecessarily or deliberately.[21]

The Vedic culture in which the Pāṇḍavas reigned was a fair, even-minded culture that, like most cultures, preferred peaceful dealings. However, when evil appeared, in whatever form, the *kṣatriya* class responded appropriately. In Vedic literature, such war is praised as an act of purification (*Ṛg Veda* 8.104.1,7,12,13,19). While Vedic culture legitimates a rare form of violence based on religious principles, it sanctifies nonviolence as the best course of action. While it justifies war, it valorizes peace. The basic premise of Vedic culture teaches this: The ultimate solution to the mind-set that leans toward violence, conflict, and war, is, indeed, religion, or spirituality, which seeks to transform the consciousness. Only when every human is thus transformed by spiritual truth will violence appear foolish and aberrant, as it truly is. Until then, violence will necessarily, if unfortunately, play a part in our life on this earth.

## Conclusion

In this short article, I have attempted to contextualize the violence alluded to in the *Gītā:* Krishna and Arjuna are on a battlefield—they are not meditating in the Himalayas. Neither is Arjuna a renunciant, without worldly duties. His problem should be considered in relation to his particular circumstances; he must decide what to do while on a battlefield.[22]

For Arjuna, as a noble warrior meant to give protection to the people,

the fighting of this battle is unquestionably righteous. His cause is just, and to execute it is his duty. Everyone, explains Krishna, can attain the highest level of consciousness by following the prescribed path of his own natural duty while being conscious of God. Religion is simply the science of learning how to do this. Throughout the world, there have been those who have reached spiritual perfection while carrying out their duties as merchants, peasants, doctors, popes, and kings. Why not as soldiers? It is not so much what you do, says the *Gītā*, but Whom you do it for.

For Arjuna, action is inevitable. But he is free to choose exactly how his action will take place. In general, one acts with attachment—we want a particular result. This, of course, means that we act with materially motivated desire. And fear. We have desire for a certain result and we have fear that this result will not be obtained. Such attached action, the *Gītā* teaches, binds us to the world of action and *re*action—to the continual performance of materially motivated action.

But there is another way of acting in this world, one that transcends fear and personal desire—it is the art of performing action passionately and dispassionately at the same time, and doing so on God's behalf. This is the *Gītā*'s central teaching. Hindus have traditionally referred to it as "non-attachment." In the Christian tradition, Church fathers have called it "holy indifference." Both terms miss the point, for they suggest a certain coldness and a kind of emotional distance. This is why people often confuse "non-attachment" with fatalism, when, as a matter of fact, the two are opposites. The fatalist couldn't be less concerned. He believes his fate is unavoidable, and for this reason he decides not to make any real effort.

But the doer of true non-attached action, as described in the *Gītā*, is the most conscientious of people. Freed from fear and materially motivated desire, such a person offers everything he does as a flower at the feet of the Lord. All work becomes equally important—imbued with new meaning. It is only toward the fruits of work, or, more specifically, the fruitive mentality—with its concomitant dualities of success or failure, winning or losing—that he or she remains indifferent. When action is done in this spirit, Krishna teaches, it gradually leads to the realization of what is *behind* action, behind all life: the Supreme Lord and man's relationship with Him.

In fact, then, the *Gītā* presents a balanced view of reality, harmonizing philosophical opposites in a coherent, workable manner. Apropos of this, it neither sanctions war nor condemns it. Nor does it advocate peace over violence. Rather, as Powell mentioned earlier, the *Gītā* is about action ver-

sus inaction. It happens to take place on a battlefield, but it could have transpired anywhere—even in one's own home.

The painter should paint. The musician should make music. And the warrior should fight. The *Gītā* is about doing what you do with a spiritual end in mind—but do it, you must. The secret, of course, is to recognize yourself as an instrument. To recognize God as the ultimate "Doer" behind each act. It is the acquisition of this mindset that the *Gītā* bequeaths to its readers.

The pacifist must respect the righteous warrior, and the warrior, the pacifist—if they are both acting on God's behalf. The spiritual warrior and the spiritual pacifist are approaching the same goal, spiritual realization. There is an underlying solidarity between them, culminating in that consciousness of God that transcends duality—Krishna consciousness.

It is clear from the *Mahābhārata* that if Arjuna did not engage in battle, the demonic forces of the opposing army would have overburdened the world with degradation and destruction. It was thus Arjuna's duty to fight, since fighting in this case would be the lesser of two evils. Clearly, he preferred peace; he valued reverence for life. But, given his circumstances, he embraced the duty at hand. This, indeed, became his method for liberation and, higher, his path back to God.

Arjuna's mystical path did not engage him in solitary meditation or contemplative meanderings but rather in physical combat. The idea of seeing mysticism in war as much as in peace was expressed by Robert Ellwood, Professor Emeritus of Religion at the University of Southern California:

> The mystical mood is not always associated with the gentleness of a St. Francis, or the pacifism of Gandhi's *ahimsa*. We can also associate it with the grim work of the soldier and the intensity of the military crusade. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna's responses to the battlefield queries of King Arjuna...enable us to see this association. For those called to war, like King Arjuna, the...[mystical] state becomes unreserved participation in the great drama of God, a play with both its bright and fell scenes. Mysticism is not always a way out of that drama, but also a way toward full participation in it with sublime composure. Thus, in medieval Japan samurai found in Zen meditation a way to steel themselves for indifference to life and death, and the *Bhagavad-Gita* teaches of Karma yoga, the way of liberation through egoless activity in the world.[23]

Ultimately, the *Mahābhārata,* taken as a whole, goes beyond *ahiṁsā* as the greatest of all dharmas. It affirms that, in the normal course of events, nonviolence is the laudable path of all true spiritualists. But the *Gītā* goes deeper than that. It explains that duality is illusory, and that over-emphasis on either war or peace misses the point—for mystical experience, to be truly absolute, must transcend the dualities of phenomenal existence; it must stand on its own, independent of mundane truths and considerations.

Throughout the *Gītā,* Krishna is trying to convey to Arjuna a certain irony about his compassion, that it is, in a larger sense, misdirected. He is trying to show Arjuna that true duty and responsibility are not borne of personal desire but are part of a larger, transcendent realm that goes beyond mere self-interest. In short, Krishna is revealing to Arjuna that his misguided reservations about engaging in this particular war are actually based on the same self-centered desires that propel his enemy to selfishly fight for land and power. He must learn to see spiritually, Krishna tells him, and to rise beyond the duality that engulfs his heart.

Thus, the *Gītā*'s final teaching is, "Abandon all secondary dharmas, all lesser forms of truth, and simply surrender unto God. He will protect you from sinful reactions. Do not fear or hesitate." (18.66) In other words, the *Gītā* teaches that spiritual perfection lies beyond selfishness and violence—it lies in the realm of selflessness and love. This is the realm of pure devotion, where all dualities, such as violence and nonviolence, war and peace, lose meaning, and become subsumed in Krishna's Divine service.

## Endnotes

1. Though the *Gītā*'s traditional theistic commentaries focus on the text's spiritual message, politicians and literati such as Gandhi, Aurobindo, and Tilak have offered differing opinions on whether the *Gītā* endorses war or peace.

2. Arvind Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), p. xv.

3. For more on the origin of allegorical versions of the *Gītā,* see the commentary of Abhinavagupta in Arvind Sharma, *Gītārthasaṅgraha* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983). Robert Minor, a leading *Gītā* authority, warns, "These allegorical interpretations are not in any way explicit in the *Gītā* itself. The writer [of the *Gītā*] does not seem to intend an allegory." See Minor, Robert, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (Columbia, Missouri: South Asia Books, 1982), p. 2.

Stephen Mitchell, translator of a recent edition of the *Gītā* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000), has attempted to refute allegorical readings. He writes, "If Arjuna is

the mind or ego in every person, what can it possibly mean, for example, to say that he is 'born with divine traits' (16.3), whereas other people have 'demonic traits'? Who can these others be if Arjuna stands for us all?" (p. 206) While this logic is appropriate for the allegorical readings that say Arjuna is Everyman, it falls flat when applied to other allegorical interpretations, as when, for instance, Arjuna represents only our higher nature, or one of the five senses.

4. See V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* (Bombay: The Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957), in which he explains that there are three levels of meaning to the text—the 'literal,' 'ethical,' and 'metaphorical' levels. He bases this approach on the great teacher Madhvācārya, who, in his *Mahābhārata-tatparya-nirnaya* (trans., B. G. Rao, Bangalore: 1941), mentions the three layers of meaning, one being allegorical.

5. Mahesh Kumar Sharan, *The Bhagavad-Gita and Hindu Sociology* (Delhi Bharat Bharati Bhandar, 1977), p. 10.

6. The names "Dhṛtarāṣṭra" and "Duryodhana" are themselves revealing. According to the original Sanskrit, *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* means "one who is attached to his kingdom," and *Duryodhana* refers to "one who fights for the wrong cause."

7. I am indebted for this information to Julian Woods, "Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata," PhD Thesis, McGill University, 1993.

8. Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, *Yoga on War and Peace* (Honesdale, Pennsylvania: The Himalayan International Institute, 1991), p. 77.

9. Angelika Malinar, "The *Bhagavadgītā* in the *Mahābhārata* TV Serial: Domestic Drama and Dharmic Solutions," in Vaudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, eds., *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 443-4.

10. Barbara Powell, *Windows Into the Infinite: A Guide to the Hindu Scriptures* (Fremont, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 37-8.

11. Julian Woods, op. cit.

12. Ibid.

13. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* ((Los Angles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1989), 1.1 purport, p. 37.

14. *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, ed., John Strohmeier (Berkeley, California: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000), p. 34.

15. Stephen L. Carter, *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 125-136.

16. My thanks to Balaji Hebbar, who teaches in the department of religion at George Washington University. He graciously shared this information in a personal conversation. My good friend Dhanurdhar Swami helped to clarify the Caturopāyas as well.

17. Rabbia Terri Harris, "Nonviolence in Islam: The Alternative Community Tradition," in *Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence in Religious Traditions,* Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, ed., (Cambridge: Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 1998), pp. 95-113).

18. Trivedi, Mark, *Mohandas Gandhi: The Man and His Vision* (Calcutta, India: Time Publications, 1968), p. 10.

19. Ibid.

20. S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, "Detachment and Moral Agency in the *Bhagavad Gītā,*" in *Perspectives on Vedānta: Essays in Honour of Professor P.T. Raju* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), p. 156.

21. Sargeant, Winthrop, trans., *The Bhagavad Gītā* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 27.

22. Much of the remainder of this paper paraphrases the commentary of Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood in *Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God.*

23. Ellwood, Robert S., *Mysticism and Religion* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), pp. 132-3.

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# Where Is Kurukshetra?

Arvind Sharma

## I. Introduction

Although the opinion of modern scholars is divided on the historicity of the Mahābhārata war,[1] to most Hindus prior to the eighteenth century the Mahābhārata war was unquestionably a historical event, which constituted the kernal of the *Mahābhārata* epic. It was also never doubted that this war was fought "in the region about modern Delhi, then known as Kurukṣetra."[2] Indeed, the very first verse of the *Bhagavadgītā* refers to it as the site where the warriors have assembled ready to fight.[3] This site of Kurukṣetra "formed part of the larger Dharmakṣetra which lay between the rivers Yamunā and Sarasvatī and was held in ancient days to be of peculiar sanctity."[4] W. Douglas P. Will, while commenting on the use of the words *dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre* in the *Bhagavadgītā* I.1, remarks:

> It is to be noted that many interpreters of the *Gītā,* while not denying the historicity of the episode, lay greater stress upon its value as allegory. ...While such interpretations are often fanciful, it cannot be denied that the author broadly identified the Kauravas with *adharma* or evil and the Pāṇḍavas with *dharma* or good; and it is significant that the first two words of the poem should present to the mind a parallel battle of the Kurus and the battle fought for Right.[5]

What needs to be noted further is that this tendency to "lay greater stress upon its value as allegory" is essentially a modern trend, when by modern we mean the period following the first English translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* in 1785 by Charles Wilkins.[6] A review of the classical commentarial


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material reveals that it was the sacred geography of the *dharmakṣetra* and the *kurukṣetra* that was primarily in the minds of the pre-modern commentators[7] and not its potential allegorical significance. As a matter of fact, Shankara does not even gloss the verse; he commences his gloss from *Bhagavadgītā* II.11.[8] Rāmānuja, on the other hand, does mention the verse, but he has little to say about the first two words under discussion.[9] A review on the pre-modern commentarial material on the Gītā reveals the striking fact that with the possible exception of a reference in Abhinavagupta's commentary[10], the pre-modern commentaries hardly ever took the expressions *dharmakṣetra* and *kurukṣetra* in other than their geographical sense.[11] Although almost all commentators are in agreement that the real purpose of the *Gītā* is spiritual—be it the inculcation of Jñāna or Bhakti—hardly anyone tried to spiritualize the setting of the *Gītā* itself. The battle-scene and its site were accepted as such literally.

## II

There is, however, a consistent trend, it seems, on the part of modern Indian[12] commentators to look upon Kurukṣetra as something more than a geographical region. This becomes clear as one analyzes the *Gītā* as interpreted by Aurobindo Ghose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, S. Radhakrishnan, and Mahatma Gandhi.

Aurobindo begins by clearly accepting the setting of the *Gītā* in its literal sense, very much in the orthodox tradition. But while the pre-modern commentators seem to accept the facts of the situation and then pass on, Aurobindo accepts the situation with comments that lead him to interpret the situation in a broader light than the pre-modern commentators ever did. Aurobindo first whole-heartedly accepts the martial setting of the *Gītā* and then writes: "We must remember that the *Gītā* was composed at a time when war was even more than it is now a necessary part of human activity, and the idea of its elimination from the scheme of life would have been an absolute chimera."[13] But, for Aurobindo, "the physical fact of the war, however, is only a special and outward manifestation of a general principle of life....War typifies and embodies physically the aspect of battle and struggle which belongs to all life, both our inner and our outer living."[14] Or, as he says quite explicitly, elsewhere, "Life is a battle and a field of death: this is Kurukṣetra."[15] Thus, for Aurobindo, the significance of Kurukṣetra is, at best, existential; it typifies the existential situation.[16]

Bal Gangadhar Tilak fully accepts the martial setting of the *Gītā,* too, and that in a literal sense. Like Aurobindo, he was a political activist, but he did not have as long a career and was forced to retire from the political arena early on. Tilak "was to suffer six years of imprisonment in Mandalay for sedition in the Muzaffarpur Case and there produce the powerful *Gītā Rahasya.*"[17] In that monumental work he glosses Kurukṣetra as "an open space of ground surrounding the city of Hastināpura," and proceeds to offer the traditional explanation of why it is called Kurukṣetra and *dharmakṣetra.*[18] But even though he ostensibly did nothing more than that and "the more activist doctrines of the *Gītā*...were dealt with objectively and in a truly orthodox tradition without any reference to political controversies ...the meaning was clear enough because of the author's background and the social and political conditions of India....To Tilak...India was the Dharmakṣetra—the Field of Righteousness—and the inactivity which seemed to have gripped India was but a reflection of the unmanliness which Arjuna felt on the field of battle."[19]

Thus, for Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the significance of Kurukṣetra, also referred to as *dharmakṣetra,* is national. He saw Kurukṣetra as an analogy for the national situation. Like Aurobindo, then, Tilak's view of Kurukṣetra went beyond the usual traditional sense of the term. He saw it as something other than merely a geographical region.

S. Radhakrishnan took this sentiment even further: Kurukṣetra was not merely a national phenomenon—it was seen as an emblem for the world, as representative of an international situation. While Aurobindo viewed the *Gītā* and Kurukṣetra in particular as typical of man's plight in this world and Tilak saw it as something national and analogical, for Radhakrishnan it was symbolic, and he viewed this symbolism as Kurukṣetra's main meaning. Thus, Radhakrishnan writes:

> The world is *dharmakṣetra;* the battleground is a moral struggle. The decisive issue lies in the heart of men where the battles are fought daily and hourly...the world is *dharmakṣetra,* the nursery of saints where the sacred flame of the spirit is never permitted to go out.[20]

The same symbolic interpretation is also imparted to the expression *kurukṣetra,* which, at first, he describes as "the land of the Kurus, a leading clan of the period." He goes on to point out that both the contending parties, the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, had descended from a common ancestor. This fact he proceeds to interpret symbolically: "The Pāṇḍavas and the

Kauravas represent the two great movements, the upward and the downward, the divine and the demoniac, the *dharma* which helps us to grow in our spiritual stature and the *adharma* which drags us down deeper into entanglement with matter. The two are not irreconcilable as they spring from the same source. The Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas are cousins and have a common ancestry."[21]

The tendency to give primacy to the symbolic rather than the literal aspect of the *Gītā* finds its fullest expression in the interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi. While the other commentators referred to earlier derived various typical, analogical, or symbolical significance from the scene of battle—but also saw it in a traditional sense—for Gandhi the Kurukṣetra is nothing if not a symbol of a higher truth. It is a setting devised for the delivery of a specific message. Thus, Mahadev Desai quotes Gandhi as saying:

> The *Gītā* is not a historical discourse. A physical illustration is often needed to drive home a spiritual truth. It is a description not of war between cousins but between the two natures in us—the Good and the Evil.[22]

He further quotes the Mahatma as follows:

> I regard Duryodhana and his party as the baser impulses in man, and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body. An eternal battle is going on between the two camps, and the Poet-seer vividly describes it.[23]

How, then, does Gandhi define Kurukṣetra? He says that "the human body is the battlefield where the eternal duel between right and wrong goes on. Therefore, it is capable of being turned into the gateway to Freedom. It is born in sin and becomes the seed-bed of sin. Hence, it is also called the field of Kuru."[24] Thus, according to Gandhi, the human body itself is Kurukṣetra.

## III. Conclusion

To sum up: For Aurobindo the significance of Kurukṣetra is existential, martial, and typical; for Bal Gangadhar Tilak, it is national, political, and metaphorical; for S. Radhakrishnan, it is universal, moral, and symbolical; and for Mahatma Gandhi, it is individual, ethical, and allegorical. For none of them is the significance purely geographical or historical as it seems to have been for the pre-modern commentators of the *Gītā*.[25]

## Endnotes

1. See R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The Vedic Age.* Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965, Chapter XIV, especially pp. 308-15.

2. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India.* London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1956, p. 407.

3. *Bhagavadgītā* I.1.

4. W. Douglas P. Hill, *The Bhagavadgītā.* Oxford University Press, 1928, p. 99, fn. 1. See J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata Book I.* Chicago University Press, 1973, p. x; also see R. C. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, p. 553, Map 2.

5. W. Douglas P. Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 98, fn. 1.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

7. See Wāsudev Laxmana Shāstri Pansīkar, ed., *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā with the Commentaries of Śrīmat Śaṅkarabhāṣya with Ānaṅgagiri: Nīlakanthī Bhashyotkarshadīpikā of Dhanapati: Śrīdharī: Gītārtha-sangraha of Abhinavagupta: and Gūdārthadīpikā of Madhusūdhana with Gūdārthatattvaloka of Śrīdharamadattaśarmā.* Bombay: Nirnayasagar Press, 1912, pp. 8-9.

8. Ibid., p. 39. "Some people think that the *Gītā* should be taken to begin from the Second Chapter. If the actual teaching commences in the eleventh *śloka* of the Second Chapter, why not start from there? Someone even told me, "God has said that he manifests himself in 'a' among the letters of the Nagari alphabet. Here the *śloka 'asochvananvasochastvam'* begins spontaneously with the letter 'a'. so we should take that as the beginning. Acharya Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita.* London, George allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1960, p. 17.

9. Mahāvanaśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā Śrīmadrāmānujācāryakṛtabhāṣyasametā.* Bombay: Samvat, 1959, p. 2.

10. Wāsudev Laxmaṇa Shāstri Paṇsīkar, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

11. See K. S. Ramaswamy Sastrigal, *The Bhagavad-Gita.* Srirangam: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1927, pp. 44-46.

12. The statement may also hold true of some non-Indian commentators. For instance, there is an incipient tendency detectable in W. Douglas P. Hill himself in the quotation cited earlier. In that passage (*op. cit.*, p. 99, fn. 1) he refers to Dharmakṣetra as a geographical area towards the beginning, adding parenthetically that it is "called in Mān. ii19 Brahmarṣi" but towards the end of the same passage takes the word "dharma" in the sense of "right" and translates Dharmaksetra as "the field of Right." The allegorical possibility is recognized in the Theosophical writings on the *Gītā* as Hill points out: See Annie Besant, *Hints on the study of the Bhagavadgītā.* Adyar: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906, pp. 6ff.; *The Bhagavad-Gītā or The Lord's Song.* London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1909, Preface, passim.

13. Sri Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gita, First Series.* Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1926, p. 68. See also p. 73.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

15. Ibid., p. 56.

16. "There is a method of explaining the *Gītā* in which not only this episode but the whole *Mahābhārata* is turned into an allegory of the inner life and has nothing to do with outward human life and action, but only with the battles of the soul and the powers that strive within us for possession. This is a view which the general character and language of the epic does not justify and if pressed, would turn the straightforward philosophical language of the *Gītā* into a constant, laborious and somewhat puerile mystification. The language of the Veda and part at least of the Purāṇas is plainly symbolic, full of figures and concrete representations of things that lie behind the veil, but the *Gītā* is written in plain terms and professes to solve the great ethical and spiritual difficulties which the life of man raises, and it will not do to go behind this plain language and thought and wrest them to the service of our fancy. But there is this much of truth in the view that the setting of the doctrine, though not symbolical, is certainly typical as indeed the setting of such a discourse as the *Gītā* must necessarily be if it is to have any relation at all with what it frames." (*Ibid.*, p. 27).

17. D. Mackenzie Brown, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Karma vs. Jñāna in the *Gītā Rahasya*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XVII, Number 2, February 1958, p. 206.

18. "Kuru, the common ancestor of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, was ploughing this field laboriously with his own hands. That is why it is called '*kṣetra*' (or field). It is said in the *Bhārata* that, when Indra thereafter gave Kuru the blessing that all those who would die on that field in war or while performing religious austerities would obtain heaven, Kuru stopped ploughing the field. (*Mahābhārata, Salya* 53) As a result of this blessing, this field came to be called *'dharmakṣetra'* or 'sacred ground.'" (Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā Rahasya*, Vol. II (Translated by Balchandra Sitaram Sukthankar, Poona: 1936, p. 852)

19. K. M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India.* London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1963, p. 43.

20. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā.* London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948, p. 79.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

22. Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi.* Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1956, p. 136. But it may be pointed out that Mahatma Gandhi does not so much deny the historicity of the *Mahābhārata* as assert the primacy of allegory over history. "The persons described therein may be historical but the author of the *Mahābhārata* has used them merely to drive home his religious theme." (*Ibid.*, p.

128) Also see M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma.* Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950, p. 150ff.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 136. This quotation is from Young India, 12-11-1925.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 135. For Gandhi's arguments in favor of an allegorical interpretation of the *Gītā,* see R. D. Ranade, *The Bhagavadgītā as a Philosophy of God realization.* Nagpur: M. S. Modak, 1959, pp. 141-43.

25. We have thus carried out in this paper, in regard to Kurukṣetra and thus only to a limited extent, "a comparative study of several classical and contemporary interpretations of the *Bhagavadgītā* by Indian authors, in order to discover any significant differences between the classical and the contemporary as two distinct groups, and also between individual interpretations" (infra, p. 1), a task which Robert Walter Stevenson has carried out in greater scope and depth in his doctoral dissertation (unpublished), submitted to Harvard University, Cambridge, in March 1975, entitled, "Historical Change in Scriptural Interpretation: A comparative Study of Classical and Contemporary Commentaries on the *Bhagavadgītā.*" As good as his work is, Stevenson did not touch on the notion of Kurukṣetra and has confined his detailed treatment to Avatāra, Ahiṁsā, Varṇa and Yajña. (op. cit., p. 111)

# Sri Aurobindo and the *Gita:* The Problem of Non-Violence vs. Dharmic Action

Michel Danino

*The text below is a lecture delivered on 12 January 2000 at the Mahatma Gandhi University (Kottayam, Kerala), as part of a seminar sponsored by India's Ministry of Culture on the "Relevance of Bhagavad Gītā in the New Millennium."*

*Michel Danino gives us Sri Aurobindo's view of the Gītā particularly with regard to the question of non-violence vs. violence, peace vs. war, ahiṁsā vs. action. This is of course a problem that has baffled a number of "pacifist" Gita commentators from Mahatma Gandhi to Wendy Doniger, an esteemed professor at the University of Chicago. Last November, the latter declared in a lecture, "The Bhagavad Gītā is not as nice a book as some Americans think. Throughout the Mahābhārata...Krishna goads human beings into all sorts of murderous and self-destructive behaviors such as war....The Gītā is a dishonest book; it justifies war." (*Philadelphia Inquirer *of 19 November 2000.) The following text confronts in a refreshingly down-to-earth manner the apparent dilemma created by the great Scripture's insistence on battle and action.*

Of all Indian scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gītā* has likely been the one most commented on. India's sages, yogīs, philosophers, thinkers have, as a rule, regarded it a sacred duty to add theirs to the long list of commentaries on these eighteen brief chapters from the *Mahābhārata*—a mere 700 *ślokas* which have left the deepest of imprints on the Indian psyche for so many centuries.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was no exception to the rule. But before writing his famous "Essays on the *Gītā*" in his monthly *Arya* between 1916 and 1920, he had had a long acquaintance with the Song of the Lord. And this was no mere intellectual or philosophical inquiry, for, in the true tradition of yoga, Sri Aurobindo always was an experimenter before anything else—he even rejected the label of "philosopher": "[Modern] philosophy," he


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said, "I consider only intellectual and therefore of secondary value. Experience and formulation of experience I consider as the true aim of philosophy."[1]

From his return from England to India in 1893, at the age of twenty, and until 1905, Sri Aurobindo worked in the Baroda State Service. This left him enough leisure to immerse himself in Sanskrit scriptures, since, having had a completely Western education, he wanted to rediscover his roots. Among his favorites were the two Epics, the Upanishads, and Kalidas. He translated large portions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* into English, though only a few survived his later tribulations. Romesh Chandra Dutt, whose own adaptations of the Epics were popular in those days, asked to see Sri Aurobindo's translations at Baroda, and remarked that had he seen them earlier, he would never have published his own.[2]

In that very first study of the *Gītā* before he was even thirty, the one thing that struck Sri Aurobindo was its bold "gospel of action"[3] and its stress on the Kshatriya's "duty to protect the world from the reign of injustice,"[4] a virile and distinctive Indian message as he immediately saw (and scribbled in his notebooks):

> The Christian and Buddhistic doctrine of turning the other cheek to the smiter is as dangerous as it is impracticable. [It is] a radically false moral distinction and the lip profession of an ideal which mankind has never been able or willing to carry into practice. The disinterested and desireless pursuit of duty is a gospel worthy of the strongest manhood; that of the cheek turned to the smiter is a gospel for cowards and weaklings. Babes and sucklings may practise it, because they must, but with others it is a hypocrisy.[5]

## The *Gītā* and the Nationalists

The *Gītā*'s stress on true manhood and "desireless duty" or *nishkama karma* was to be Sri Aurobindo's prime inspiration during his revolutionary days. It is little known that Sri Aurobindo was, in 1906, the first Indian to openly call for complete independence from the British Empire,[6] at a time when the Congress Moderates were busy praising the "providential character" of British rule in India and swearing their "unswerving allegiance to the British crown." Through the pages of the English daily *Bande Mataram* and in his speeches, Sri Aurobindo exhorted his countrymen to find in themselves the strength to stand up to their colonial masters. He soon became

the leader in Bengal of those whom the Moderates contemptuously called the "Extremists." In April 1908, a few days before his arrest in the Alipore Bomb Case, he wrote:

> A certain class of minds shrink from aggressiveness as if it were a sin. Their temperament forbids them to feel the delight of battle and they look on what they cannot understand as something monstrous and sinful. "Heal hate by love, drive out injustice by justice, slay sin by righteousness" is their cry. Love is a sacred name, but it is easier to speak of love than to love....The *Gītā* is the best answer to those who shrink from battle as a sin and aggression as a lowering of morality.[7]

Clearly, Sri Aurobindo anticipated here the rise of non-violence as a creed; but he took Śrī Krishna's admonition of Arjuna literally and, like Swami Vivekananda, put his faith in strength, not in *ahiṁsā*. Shortly after his release from jail the following year, Sri Aurobindo developed this point in a speech on the *Gītā* at Khulna:

> The virtue of the Brahmin is a great virtue: You shall not kill. This is what Ahiṁsā means. [But] if the virtue of Ahiṁsā comes to the Kshatriya, if you say "I will not kill," there is no one to protect the country. The happiness of the people will be broken down. Injustice and lawlessness will reign. The virtue becomes a source of misery, and you become instrumental in bringing misery and conflict to the people.[8]

The teaching of the *Gītā,* he said in his concluding words, "means perfection of action. It makes man great. It gives him the utter strength, the utter bliss which is the goal of life in the world."[9]

Indeed, the revolutionaries in Bengal and Maharashtra drew such inspiration from the *Gītā* that the colonial authorities came to regard it as a "gospel of terrorism," and it became one of the most sought-after pieces of evidence in police raids; it is also one of the chief influences cited in the 1918 Rowlatt Sedition Committee Report, side by side with Swami Vivekananda's works.[10] Sri Aurobindo himself is said to have given initiation to several revolutionaries by making them swear on the *Gītā* that they would do everything to liberate India from the foreign yoke.[11] But in the columns of the *Karmayogin*, he took objection to this summary characterization of the *Gītā*:

> We strongly protest against the brand of suspicion that has been sought

to be placed in many quarters on the teaching and possession of the *Gītā*—our chief national heritage, our hope for the future, our great force for the purification of the moral weaknesses that stain and hamper our people.[12]

## The Yoga of the *Gītā*

Though he drew strength from the *Gītā,* Sri Aurobindo knew better than to see in it "a mere gospel of war and heroic action, a Nietzschean creed of power and high-browed strength, of Hebraic or old Teutonic hardness."[13] During his year-long solitary imprisonment in the Alipore jail, he intensively practised the yoga described by Śrī Krishna. Soon after his unexpected acquittal in May 1909, in his famous speech at Uttarpara, he recounted something of his experience:

> He placed the *Gītā* in my hands. His strength entered into me and I was able to do the Sādhana of the *Gītā*. I was not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Śrī Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do his work.[14]

To "realize," let us note again. And what he first realized was the divine Oneness described in the *Gītā*: "The man whose self is in Yoga, sees the self in all beings and all beings in the self, he is equal-visioned everywhere. He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me, to him I do not get lost, nor does he get lost to Me." (VI.29, 30) In Sri Aurobindo's words:

> I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Śrī Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me his shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Nārāyaṇa who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arms of Śrī Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover....I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Nārāyaṇa whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies.
>
> When the case opened...I was followed by the same insight. He said to me, "When you were cast into jail, did not your heart fail and did you

not cry out to me, where is Thy protection? Look now at the Magistrate, look now at the Prosecuting Counsel." I looked and it was not the Magistrate whom I saw, it was Vasudeva, it was Nārāyaṇa who was sitting there on the bench. I looked at the Prosecuting Counsel and it was not the Counsel for the prosecution that I saw; it was Śrī Krishna who sat there and smiled. "Now do you fear ?" He said, "I am in all men and I overrule their actions and their words."[15]

Such was the supreme experience Sri Aurobindo received in jail, which never left him afterwards. And such is the supreme paradox of the *Gītā,* that we must act and act boldly and sometimes fiercely, knowing and seeing all the while that all is He, that there is nothing in this entire universe that is not essentially the Divine. I stress the word "essentially," because there lies, according to Sri Aurobindo, the key to the apparent paradox: all is essentially divine, but until it is manifestly so, this creation will remain a Kurukshetra and it will be our duty to fight for the truth. For the *Gītā* is not concerned with our shallow and too often hypocritical "human rights"; it deals rather with our human duties: we are human beings only if we are prepared to fight for the truth, not otherwise.

In his *Essays,* Sri Aurobindo expounded at length, and never in a dry metaphysical manner, every aspect of the *Gītā,* ethical and spiritual: its stress on action, its karma yoga based on true equality, non-attachment and renunciation of the ego, culminating in the abandonment of all dharmas, its broad synthesis of Vedānta, Saṅkhya, Jñāna, Bhakti and even Tantra, its deep insights into the workings of Nature, into human nature with its divine as well as diabolical possibilities, its call to go beyond morality and the three *guṇas* to the supreme truth....I cannot even outline here these profound expositions which go to the roots of almost every problem of life and yoga which Indian thought and practice has faced. But, at the cost of incompleteness, there is one core teaching of the *Gītā* we need to look into, one that Sri Aurobindo lays particular stress on, and the very one that had inspired him during his revolutionary days—that is, the problem of action and the use of force to defend *dharma.*

## The *Gītā*, the Gospel of Strength, and Non-Violence

It is customary nowadays to hear that Hinduism is at bottom a "message of tolerance and non-violence"—that has become a kind of slogan which our politicians and media people alike are fond of mouthing without even

stopping to think about it. Let us for now pass over the question of tolerance, except to recall these words of Sri Krishna: "Even those who sacrifice to other godheads with devotion and faith, they also sacrifice to Me....I am equal in all existences, none is dear to Me, none hated" (9.23, 29)—this, along with the famous Vedic affirmation about the many names of the One Existent, contains much more than what is ordinarily meant by "tolerance," and it is an assurance we are not likely to encounter in any Scripture of the three Semitic religions.

But let us rather dwell on the point of non-violence. Our first observation is that, unlike Buddhism or Jainism, Hinduism never made a universal doctrine of *ahiṁsā,* which remained limited to the Brahmin's dharma, even then with qualifications. True, we have in the *Mahābhārata* the maxim *ahiṁsā paramo dharmah,* "*ahiṁsā* is the highest law," but that is never intended for the Kshatriya. There is even a very sensible observation made to the Brahmin Kausika: "When the earth is ploughed, numberless creatures lurking in the ground are destroyed....Fish preys upon fish, various animals prey upon other species, and some species even prey upon themselves.-...The earth and the air all swarm with living organisms which are unconsciously destroyed by men from mere ignorance. *Ahiṁsā* was ordained of old by men who were ignorant of the true facts. There is not a man on the face of the earth who is free from the sin of doing injury to creatures."[16] Then there is the humorous episode in the *Devī Bhāgavata* (skanda 4), in which Brihaspati (in the guise of Sukracharya) preaches *ahiṁsā paramo dharmah* to the Asuras and enjoins them "not to injure even those who come to kill you"—but this he preaches to the Asuras so as to disarm them, not to the Devas! Finally, let us note that even Jainism, which made the maxim one of its central teachings, allows monks to attain liberation by fasting to death—an undeniable act of *hiṁsā.* There is clearly nothing absolute about the much-abused saying.

There is also nothing non-violent about the wars in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata,* about some of the Veda's fierce gods, or Dūrga's and Kālī's pitiless destruction of Asuras. Sanskrit texts, as also the Saṅgam literature and folk legends, resound with heroes and heroic deeds, and Śrī Krishna echoes them when he declares: "I am the strength of the mighty" (10.36).

As was his wont, Sri Aurobindo faced this central problem squarely:

> Unless we have the honesty and courage to look existence straight in the face, we shall never arrive at any effective solution of its discords and oppositions. We must see first what life and the world are....Our very

bodily life is a constant dying and being reborn, the body itself a beleaguered city attacked by assailing, protected by defending forces whose business is to devour each other....War and destruction are not only a universal principle of our life here in its purely material aspects, but also of our mental and moral existence....It is impossible, at least as men and things are, to advance, to grow, to fulfill and still to observe really and utterly that principle of harmlessness which is yet placed before us as the highest and best law of conduct.[17]

Significantly, this passage from his *Essays* was published in the December 1916 issue of the *Arya*, in the middle of the First World War, but also when Mahatma Gandhi had joined the national movement and started propagating his doctrine of *ahiṁsā*. Sri Aurobindo continues:

> This world of our battle and labour is a fierce dangerous destructive devouring world in which life exists precariously and the soul and body of man move among enormous perils, a world in which by every step forward, whether we will it or no, something is crushed and broken, in which every breath of life is a breath too of death. To put away the responsibility for all that seems to us evil or terrible on the shoulders of a semi-omnipotent Devil, or to put it aside as part of Nature, making an unbridgeable opposition between world-nature and God-Nature, as if Nature were independent of God, or to throw the responsibility on man and his sins, as if he had a preponderant voice in the making of this world or could create anything against the will of God, are clumsily comfortable devices in which the religious thought of India has never taken refuge. We have to look courageously in the face of the reality and see that it is God and none else who has made this world in his being and that so he has made it. We have to see that Nature devouring her children, Time eating up the lives of creatures, Death universal and ineluctable and the violence of the Rudra forces in man and Nature are also the supreme Godhead in one of his cosmic figures.[18]

In these days when, again, easy and noisy slogans have taken the place of thinking and discerning, and when we are constantly told that "All religions are the same and speak the same truth," mark how Sri Aurobindo never fails to point out the distinctive traits and contributions of the Indian genius :

> It is only a few religions which have had the courage to say without any reserve, like the Indian, that this enigmatic World-Power is one Deity, one Trinity, to lift up the image of the Force that acts in the world in the

figure not only of the beneficent Durgā, but of the terrible Kālī in her blood-stained dance of destruction and to say, "This too is the Mother; this also know to be God; this too, if thou hast the strength, adore." And it is significant that the religion which has had this unflinching honesty and tremendous courage, has succeeded in creating a profound and widespread spirituality such as no other can parallel. For truth is the foundation of real spirituality and courage is its soul.[19]

Bracing words these, but lest one might imagine that Sri Aurobindo is advocating some blood-thirsty cult, let me add this conclusion of his:

> A day may come, must surely come, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; meanwhile the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion.[20]

## Examples from India's Recent History

Note the word "practical" in the above quote. It should now be clear that Sri Aurobindo radically differed from the Mahatma on the practice of non-violence, and as this difference is glossed over in conventional scholarship, I think we should examine it, since such differences, far from being awkward, are in fact fecund if faced honestly. It is true that in April 1907, Sri Aurobindo had exposed in a series of brilliant articles in the *Bande Mataram* his "Doctrine of Passive Resistance" intended to become a mass movement against British rule, and that the series, which was read throughout the country in those days, seems to have influenced Gandhi on his return from Africa. But Sri Aurobindo never made a cult of ideology either, and in those same articles he had also elucidated the limits of non-cooperation and passive resistance, which he saw as the only practicable policy of the day in the face of the rulers' crushing military superiority and the Congress Moderates' lack of support for the ideal of independence:

> Every great *yajña* has its Rakshasas who strive to baffle the sacrifice.... Passive resistance is an attempt to meet such disturbers by peaceful and self-contained *brahmatejas*; but even the greatest Rishis of old could not, when the Rakshasas were fierce and determined, keep up the sacrifice without calling in the bow of the Kshatriya. We should have the bow of the Kshatriya ready for use, though in the background. Politics is espe-

> cially the business of the Kshatriya, and without Kshatriya strength at its back, all political struggle is unavailing.[21]

Nevertheless, considerable similarities in the practical aspects of the two leaders' policies prompted some scholars to paint them with the same brush. When, at the time of Independence, a biographer of his fell victim to such facile parallels, Sri Aurobindo protested in the following note (written in the third person):

> In some quarters there is the idea that Sri Aurobindo's political standpoint was entirely pacifist, that he was opposed in principle and in practice to all violence and that he denounced terrorism, insurrection, etc., as entirely forbidden by the spirit and letter of the Hindu religion. It is even suggested that he was a forerunner of the gospel of Ahiṁsā. This is quite incorrect. Sri Aurobindo is neither an impotent moralist nor a weak pacifist.
>
> The rule of confining political action to passive resistance was adopted as the best policy for the National Movement at that stage and not as a part of a gospel of Non-violence or pacifist idealism. Peace is a part of the highest ideal, but it must be spiritual or at the very least psychological in its basis; without a change in human nature it cannot come with any finality. If it is attempted on any other basis (moral principle or gospel of Ahiṁsā or any other), it will fail and even may leave things worse than before....Sri Aurobindo's position and practice in this matter was the same as Tilak's and that of other Nationalist leaders who were by no means Pacifists or worshippers of Ahiṁsā.[22]

It may appear hard to accept that the gospel of Ahiṁsā "may leave things worse than before." But can we for a moment picture what would have happened if, in the middle of the Second World War, with much of Europe including France under German occupation, Britain had given way to the Nazi wave? And yet that is exactly what the Mahatma exhorted the British to do in his famous 1940 open letter "to every Briton," in which he called for the British to lay down their arms "because war is bad in essence," "to fight Nazism without arms or...with non-violent arms," and to "invite Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini to take...possession of your beautiful island."[23] No doubt Hitler would have been delighted had Britain followed such advice, just as Duryodhana would have been highly pleased to see Arjuna lay down his

bow. But in both cases, what would have been the result for mankind?

By contrast, in September 1940, Sri Aurobindo sent the Governor of Madras a contribution and a message in support of the Allies during the War:

> We feel that not only is this a battle waged in just self-defence and in defence of the nations threatened with the world-domination of Germany and the Nazi system of life, but that it is a defence of civilisation and its highest attained social, cultural and spiritual values and of the whole future of humanity. To this cause our support and sympathy will be unswerving whatever may happen....[24]

Or let us consider the case of the 1942 Cripps mission. Harried by Germany, increasingly pressured by the U.S.A., a proud and reluctant Churchill, who had sworn ever to protect the Empire, was compelled to present to India on a gold platter an offer of dominion status, so as to secure her support during the war. (That was the third such offer since the start of the War, but in more explicit terms than ever.) In spite of messages from Sri Aurobindo to the Congress urging them to accept the proposal which amounted to virtual independence at the end of the War, and although others (including Nehru and Rajagopalachari) favored it, Gandhi told Sri Aurobindo's messenger he found it unacceptable, once again "because of his opposition to war."[25] (Churchill also, I should add, forbade Sir Stafford Cripps to show the slightest flexibility.) The result of Gandhi's dogmatic stand on the evil nature of war—a dogma Śrī Krishna rebuffs in the *Gītā*—was to be tragic for India. It not only meant an unnecessary postponement of Independence, but it made India's bloody vivisection unavoidable, even as the Mahatma promised it would happen only "over his dead body"; it also meant three wars with our neighbor and the continuing war of attrition and terrorism in Kashmir.

In his *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, the distinguished historian R. C. Majumdar was forced to reject "the generally accepted view which gave Mahatma Gandhi the 'sole credit for the freedom of India'."[26] He noted:

> It has been my painful duty to show that...the popular image of Gandhi cannot be reconciled with what he actually was....It will also be seen that the current estimate of the degree or extent of his success bears no relation to actual facts.[27]

Today we find that more and more scholars are rallying to those views and, while giving due respect to the Mahatma, are beginning to whisper that his rigid insistence on an impracticable non-violence may have cost the country dear.[28] Such a reassessment can only be healthy, for there is nothing more debilitating than to draw a righteous veil over errors of the past.

Still, we should note that Gandhi did try to understand Sri Aurobindo's viewpoint; in 1924, for instance, he sent his son Devadas to Pondicherry to sound him on non-violence. Sri Aurobindo simply replied, "Suppose there is an invasion of India by the Afghans, how are you going to meet it with non-violence?"[29] We all know what happened when Kashmir was invaded immediately after Independence, or when Chinese troops poured into India in 1962, or even last year when Pakistani troops occupied peaks in Kargil. And I am afraid there are more Kargils to come. It is a moot point what the Mahatma's advice would be in such cases: to lay down arms and meet the enemy with non-violence?

The following words of Sri Aurobindo, written in December 1916 in his *Essays on the Gītā*, appear prophetic in retrospect :

> We will use only soul-force and never destroy by war or any even defensive employment of physical violence? Good, though until soul-force is effective, the Asuric force in men and nations tramples down, breaks, slaughters, burns, pollutes, as we see it doing today, but then at its ease and unhindered, and you have perhaps caused as much destruction of life by your abstinence as others by resort to violence....[30]

## Non-Violence and Shakti

If, therefore, we mean the *Gītā*'s teaching to be a practical one, which is what Sri Aurobindo did, we have to reject non-violence as a creed—it may remain an individual's choice, for every individual is free to follow his preferred path, but anyone who has to wage a battle for dharma or for the truth—which comes to the same thing—will find a better ally in the use of shakti which the *Gītā* advocates. Arjuna is of course something of all of us, the symbol of "the struggling human soul," in Sri Aurobindo's words, and Kurukshetra is the "battle of life," even of our humdrum everyday life if we take the trouble of living for a purpose. Resist a corrupt official and a Kurukshetra opens in front of you; let a women's group take on liquor barons and you can hear the twang of the Gāṇḍiva; if a few villagers or tribals oppose a timber mafia, you will see a hundred Kauravas rise; or simply try

to keep your street clean and learn what *ghoram karma* (dreadful work) is all about!

Now, a frequent misconception is that if we reject non-violence, we must fall into violence—there is no alternative beyond those two opposite poles. That is a terrible and costly confusion, which the *Gītā* goes to great pains to dispel: between blind, asuric violence and noble but impotent non-violence, there is conscious, detached shakti, which can remain powerfully still or also wage war, as circumstances demand. True, in the world's history, most aggressive expansions, especially the Christian and Islamic, followed the asuric path and washed the earth with blood—but there is at least one notable exception, and that is India, whose sole weapon of conquest was always her culture. Yet she was by no means non-violent. When provoked, she would retaliate. Alexander was confronted by Paurava's armies; the Pratihara empire, the last Hindu empire of Northwest India, checked the progress of Islam into India for three centuries; we know well enough the great deeds of a Shivaji or a Lakshmibai and countless other heroes of this land, including those who fought and often died for India's freedom. Śrī Krishna's injunctions as to the Kshatriya's dharma were therefore no dead letter in India's past.

As to the present, it is a frequently heard complaint that Mahatma Gandhi's teaching of non-violence is no longer followed in India; but it rather seems to me that it has penetrated the collective Indian consciousness deep enough to make it wince at the very thought of force and put a brake on its use even when and where it is patently needed. Certainly no other country would have tolerated with so little reaction the amount of aggression India has suffered since Independence, and at what terrible cost.

India's one tragedy is that she has not had the courage to put to effective use the elements of strength in her heritage. The *Gītā* provides a telling case in point. Here is a brief and accessible text, which, on the face of it, contains nothing overly esoteric. It has evoked the admiration of countless thinkers outside India, from Emerson to Aldous Huxley and André Malraux—here is the best possible guide of ethics (though not merely that), which disentangles with miraculous ease some of the most knotty questions humanity has asked—and, except for a course or two of philosophy, our schools and colleges will not teach it to our children. And why not? Because, so far as I have been able to make out, it is a "religious" text. A more thoughtless aberration would be hard to come by, and I wonder how those who drafted India's education policy arrogated the right to deprive young

Indians of their heritage. No, the *Gītā* is not a "religious" or even a "Hindu" scripture. It belongs to all humanity and its very text repeatedly makes this universality plain:

"I am the path and goal," says Śrī Krishna, "the upholder, the master, the witness, the house and country, the refuge, the benignant friend; I the birth and status and destruction of apparent existence, I the imperishable seed of all and their eternal resting-place....I am the silence of things secret and the knowledge of the knower....Nothing moving or unmoving, animate or inanimate in the world can be without me." (9.18, 10.38, 10.39) Is this a sectarian declaration?

Moreover, the *Gītā* is about dharma, and dharma is not religion. It is ethics in the deepest sense. If we decide that education is only intended to prepare children for getting jobs and has nothing to do with making better human beings out of them, then we admit that there is no more meaning to a man's life than to an ant's. The *Gītā*'s message is a practical tool: it gives a purpose in life, and a purpose is something practical; it gives strength, and strength is something practical; it gives self-confidence, elevation in thought, a broader view of life, a deeper understanding of human nature, and those are all practical things. I believe India would be in a better shape today had the *Gītā* not been kept out of sight and hearing of young Indians, except for some abstract study of the Sāṅkhya philosophy or a few *ślokas* for burials and other ceremonies. Was Sri Aurobindo's depiction of the *Gītā* as "our chief national heritage, our hope for the future" just so many empty words?

Permit me to quote Swami Vivekananda too, in whose name we are gathered today. Speaking in Calcutta to a few young aspirants, he said:

> In order to remove this delusion which had overtaken Arjuna, what did the Bhagavān say? As I always preach that you should...draw [a man's] attention to the omnipotent power that is in him, in the same way does the Bhagavān speak to Arjuna: "Thou art that Atman imperishable, beyond all evil...Yield not to unmanliness." If you, my sons, can proclaim this message to the world, "Yield not to unmanliness," then all this disease, grief, sin and sorrow will vanish from the face of the earth in three days....Proclaim to the whole world with trumpet voice, "There is no sin in thee, there is no misery in thee; thou art the reservoir of omnipotent power. Arise, awake, and manifest the divinity within!"[31]

Because they insisted on building a new, rejuvenated India on the great

truths of her ancient heritage and not on the fleeting destructive values of the West, neither Sri Aurobindo nor Swami Vivekananda are in favor with current thinking, if it can be called that. In fact, today they would probably be labelled "revivalists" by our hypnotized intelligentsia, and they would certainly find themselves swimming against the cheerless tide, at loggerheads with almost every direction the country has taken since Independence, and with the educational system in particular. They would never have imagined that education in free India could have rejected anything having to do with Indian culture, preferring to go on with Macaulay's denationalizing methods. Is Indian culture then something so shameful, so ignoble that it has to be concealed from our children, except in the privacy of the home? Well, perhaps it is after all, but if it is, let us have the courage to declare so openly and have done with it rather than brandish it just to attract foreign tourists to a few temples and ruins.

I cannot resist the temptation of mentioning a case in point: it is significant that none of our successive education ministers thought it worthwhile to give Swami Vivekananda's or Sri Aurobindo's names to just one out of the 216 universities spread over the country; Mahatma Gandhi has two universities in his name, one of which is of course this one here; Dr. Ambedkar has six, Jawaharlal Nehru three, and a number of much lesser Indians have one. But no "Swami Vivekananda University," no "Sri Aurobindo University"—Swami Vivekananda who shook India awake, Sri Aurobindo who in 1906 became the first principal of the newly opened Bengal National College, Sri Aurobindo the Nationalist leader, the editor and chief writer of *Bande Mataram* and *Karmayogin*, Sri Aurobindo who laid the foundations for an original Indian perspective in so many fields of yoga, thought, action, and life.

This omission may be a small thing in itself, but it is revealing of the unease the establishment feels towards these awkward personalities. Which Indian student ever learns anything of substance about Swami Vivekananda or Sri Aurobindo? Either we find them worthy of being taught to our children for their greater benefit as human beings, in which case we should roll up our sleeves and set to work, or there is no point in making them objects of hollow praise as is too often the case.

Sri Aurobindo had and still has a message for his country, and a practical one, for he was no effete dreamer. Whether calling for India's independence, supporting the Allies, urging acceptance of Cripps' proposal, he practised what he called "spiritual realism."[32] It is India's misfortune that he

was not heard, and her continuing misfortune that he and Swami Vivekananda are shoved aside like museum pieces.

Of course, it would be a mistake to equate Sri Aurobindo's entire teaching and yoga with the *Gītā*. As he said,

> I regard the spiritual history of mankind and especially of India as a constant development of a divine purpose, not a book that is closed and the lines of which have to be constantly repeated. Even the Upanishads and the *Gītā* were not final though everything may be there in seed....[33]

But in all his actions, Sri Aurobindo faithfully followed the spirit of the *Gītā*. His life is, in my opinion, the best commentary on the great Scripture.

"If one is among the...seekers of [the] Truth," he once wrote to a disciple, "one has to take sides for the Truth, to stand against the forces that attack it and seek to stifle it. Arjuna wanted not to stand for either side, to refuse any action of hostility even against assailants; Śrī Krishna, who insisted so much on *samata* (equality, equanimity), strongly rebuked his attitude and insisted equally on his fighting the adversary. 'Have *samata*,' he said, 'and seeing clearly the Truth, fight.'...It is a spiritual battle inward and outward; by neutrality and compromise or even passivity one may allow the enemy force to pass and crush down the Truth and its children."[34]

**Endnotes**

N.B.: In references to Sri Aurobindo's works ('Centenary Edition,' Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), the first number refers to the volume, the second to the page number.

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22. *On Himself*, 26.22.

23. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, "Method of Non-violence—Mahatma Gandhi's appeal to every Briton," July 4, 1940. See a longer extract and Sri Aurobindo's reaction to the open letter in *India's Rebirth*, p. 227.

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# GANDHI, NONVIOLENCE, AND THE *BHAGAVAD-GITA*

Bradley S. Clough

## Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi or Mahātma ("Great Soul") Gandhi is perhaps history's most well-known proponent of nonviolence, and deservedly so. Throughout his career, Gandhi tirelessly and constantly promoted nonviolence, both as the most effective method of social and political protest and as a way of living a most spiritually fulfilling life. In this essay, we will examine one significant way in which Gandhi advocated nonviolence, which was through his unique interpretation of the one work he valued most in his life, the *Bhagavad-gītā* (hereafter, *Gītā*). The position held here is that because both nonviolence and the *Gītā* occupied places of utmost importance in his life, it was imperative for Gandhi to find ways to make the *Gītā* relevant to his promotion of nonviolence. Sometimes he strained in his efforts, but ultimately he was able to arrive at hermeneutic strategies that were convincing to many if not all individuals who followed his career.

In order to accomplish the proposed task, we will first, in the opening two sections of this essay, assess the place that the *Gītā* and nonviolence respectively held in Gandhi's life. Next, in section three, because of the bold and controversial statements that Gandhi made about the *Gītā,* it will be necessary to look at how Gandhi came to see himself as occupying a place of privilege with respect to interpretation of the *Gītā.* Finally, in section four, we will bring to light the actual arguments that Gandhi made for seeing the *Gītā* as a text that taught nonviolence.



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## I. Gandhi's Relationship with the *Bhagavad-gītā* and Its Place in his Religious World

Although Gandhi was exposed to the *Gītā* early in his youth, when at age four he heard his father reciting its verses during his last days, he was not impressed by it until his nineteenth year (1889) when, during his first year of law training in London, he was encouraged by two Theosophists, bachelor brothers, to join them in reading it.[1] Summing up well the impact of the *Gītā* at that time and its place in his later life, Gandhi recalled in his autobiography that,

> The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded me invaluable help in my moments of gloom.[2]

Elsewhere, Gandhi remembered that in 1889 he devoured Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of the *Gītā* "from cover to cover and was entranced by it."[3] His autobiography, however, went on to confess that he didn't fully study the *Gītā* at that point and that it would be years before it became part of his daily reading.[4] He saw his first acquaintance with the *Gītā* as lacking, later writing that he "had not yet fully understood the significance of non-violence as a principle of dharma."[5] This indicates the close relationship which he came to see between the *Gītā* and nonviolence, as the text became more and more a part of his life, and which we will explore in some detail later in this essay.

It was in his South Africa years that the *Gītā* started to become the supreme authority in Gandhi's life. There he came to read and reflect upon it on a daily basis. He devoted himself to memorizing the *Gītā,* even taking to sticking slips of paper with *Gītā* verses to his bathroom wall, so as to commit more to memory during his morning ablutions.[6] Gandhi's increased knowledge of the *Gītā* began in South African jail in 1908-9, when he used the opportunity to read great works from many traditions, both religious and secular. His readings included the *Gītā,* which he was seriously returning to for the first time in two decades, and a commentary on it by a Gujarati Sanskrit scholar.[7] Gandhi's use of jail time to read deeply was a pattern he continued throughout his life. While imprisoned in India in the early 1920s, he embarked upon a study of Hindu scriptures, including parts of the Vedas (with a few Upaniṣads), major *smṛtis* including the *Manusmṛti,* and the Purāṇas. But according to J.T.F. Jordens, his religious ideas appear little influenced by those texts. From 1925 on, Gandhi referred to the *Gītā* almost exclusively

among Hindu scriptures.[8] Indeed, it is remarkable, and a clear sign of the special place that the *Gītā* increasingly held in his life, that although he wrote no other coherent religious treatise and claimed to propound no new religious system, between the years 1926 and 1932, he devoted three works[9] totaling roughly 360 pages to translating and commenting on the *Gītā*. So, it was the only Hindu text he wrote about, and that at great length. These three works, composed largely in response to questions from ashramites at his Satyagraha Ashram, located in Sabarmati, show that Gandhi was very much involved in meditating on the religious resources that nourished and sustained him. Judith M. Brown has asserted that the kind of productivity that Gandhi was generating in this period shows that at this point in his life, religion was more important to Gandhi than politics, although she is quick to acknowledge that the two would become inseparable for him.[10]

The *Gītā* became part of Gandhi's and indeed India's life in other noteworthy ways when Gandhi urged, in his first call to all Indians in 1919, a national nonviolent *satyagraha*[11], in which he called upon all Hindus involved to fast and read the *Gītā* on the day of the declared national strike. This was met with strong criticism from Hindu authorities, who accused Gandhi of misunderstading the message of the *Gītā* which, they held, encouraged and approved of violence.[12] In response to the accusation that the *Gītā* was inappropriate for nonviolent agitation, Gandhi stated:

> [the *Gītā*] is not as historical work, it is a great religious book, summing up the teaching of all religions. The poet has seized the occasion of the war between the Pandavas and Kauravas...for drawing attention to the war going on in our bodies between the forces of good and the forces of evil.[13]

The interpretive strategy of reading the *Gītā* as such an allegory was one frequently employed by Gandhi, as we will see later on in this essay.

Further evidence that Gandhi was using the *Gītā* to create the marriage of politics and religion, for which he is so well known, is that he and his fellow *satyagrahis*[14] carried copies of the *Gītā* with them on his famous "salt-*satyagraha*" in 1930.

As Gandhi aged, other signs indicated the central place of the *Gītā* in his life. For many years, a reading from the *Gītā* had been part of the regular religious observances at the Satyagraha Ashram. As the years went on, Gandhi made this communal recitation more and more a part of his public addresses, once again bringing the political and the religious together. Furthermore, as a key part of Gandhi's schedule of discipline in the

Yeravda jail in the early 1930s, he devoted daily time to learning the *Gītā* by heart, even using his time in the lavatory for this purpose.[15] During his fasts, which he took up with greater frequency as the years passed, both as a way of protest and of harnessing power, Gandhi gave up most of his typical routine, such as writing correspondences and seeing visitors, but he still devoted time to meditation upon and hearing recitation from the *Gītā*. In his older years, Gandhi was also known to chastise himself for not following the *Gītā*'s teaching of detachment from the fruits of action, as he still found himself moved by lesser human emotions. He felt that this detachment, the main lesson of the *Gītā* for him,[16] was the hardest thing to achieve, yet essential if the individual was to experience peace and gain the vision of the true self (*ātman*) as it related to ultimate reality (*brahman*).[17] Echoing this, he stated in his *The Message of the Gita* that "the object of the *Gita* is to show the most excellent way to attain self realization."[18]

Finally, Gandhi's faith in the saving power of the *Gītā* is perhaps best shown by a time when by his own reckoning he was "near death's door" due to overwork and dysentery, and he had his fellow ashramites spend all of his waking hours chanting the *Gītā* to him, as he was incapable of reading.[19]

The tremendous import of the *Gītā* to Gandhi's life can also be gleaned from the superlative phrases and statements he reserved for it. Even in reminiscing about his early career in South Africa, when he was still teaching himself the *Gītā* and insisting that study of it had to give way to the creation and nurture of *satyagraha,* he could still remark that "to me the *Gita* became an infallible code of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference...I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of *all* (my emphasis) my troubles and trials.[20]

From that point on, the praises flowed over the years. It was constantly referred to as "the mother who never lets me down," and "my *kamadhenu* (wish-fulfilling cow)."[21] Throughout his later life, the *Gītā* became the quintessential religious scripture, not just for Hinduism but for all spiritual traditions. He said that the *Gītā* "is the essence of dharma," "a synthesis of the Hindu religion," and "the key to a knowledge of the Shastras."[22] Even more pointedly, he insisted that "whatever is contrary to its main theme I reject as un-Hindu," and "if all the other scriptures were reduced to ashes, the seven hundred verses of this imperishable booklet are quite enough to tell me what Hinduism is and how one can live up to it."[23] Furthermore, the *Gītā* for Gandhi was the very essence of religion itself: "The *Gita* has become for me the key to the scriptures of the world. It un-

ravels for me the deepest mysteries to be found in them."[24]

Even given this highest status, the *Gītā* was not an inaccessible, complex work in Gandhi's mind. In 1939, on the occasion of a Gita Jayanti or day celebrating the greatness of the text, Gandhi remarked, "I do not regard the *Gita* as an abstruse book....in my opinion a man with ordinary intelligence should find no difficulty in gathering the simple message of the *Gita*."[25] In addition to its simplicity, its wide-ranging scope and all-encompassing nature has something of import in it for everyone:

> But the general trend of the *Gita* is, in my opinion, unmistakable. It is accepted by all Hindu sects as authoritative. It is free from any form of dogma. In a short compass it gives a complte reasoned moral code. It satisfies both the intellect and the heart. It is thus both philosophical and devotional. Its appeal is universal."[26]

Because of its usefulness, Gandhi wanted to provide concrete instructions with respect to learning the *Gītā*. Likening its usefulness for the mind to a spinning wheel's benefit for the body, Gandhi taught his fellow ashramites that they must follow a regular schedule of reciting verses from the text daily, with the verses changing every fortnight. Admitting the difficulty of this practice, he allowed that people could memorize the verses from the book, instead of through purely oral instruction. He encouraged his ashramites to remain steady in this practice by imagining that the whole world is their audience, and thinking about what a boon it would be if they went on reciting the verses. And lest one forget the main purpose of learning the *Gītā*, Gandhi declared that "This is the only right course for anyone who has dedicated his life to non-violence."[27]

The rewards for coming to learn the *Gītā* in this way are almost untold:

> As I have told you, the *Gita* is a big knowledge feast, it is the very *amrta*[28] of knowledge. This is so because if you memorize its verses and are able to call them up, you will get energy from it and it will save you...These verses are like oxygen. For those who read the *Gita* with faith, it is like the fabled wish-yielding tree. It can end all of our threefold[29] sufferings.[30]

Furthermore, Gandhi asserts that those who meditate on the *Gītā* in this way will derive new meanings from it everyday, and will have all of their spiritual tangles unraveled.[31]

As one can see, Gandhi's litany of superlatives for the *Gītā* as the most

essential and greatest religious work are almost endless. To conclude here, we end with one last statement, which stands out for the deeply heartfelt sentiments that Gandhi held for this most beloved scripture:

> ...I must confess to you that when doubt haunts me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the *Bhagavad-gita* and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies and, if they have not left any visible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of the *Bhagavad-gita*.

If one is left thinking at this point that the *Bhagavad-gītā* was Gandhi's sole spiritual inspiration, it bears noting that he was influenced by many other writings and figures, and that his religiosity encompassed more than a single text. The *Isha Upanishad*, Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and *The Sermon on the Mount* all impacted Gandhi's life greatly, as did the teachings of Gandhi's Jain guru, Raychandbai. In addition, Judith M. Brown, in her masterful biography of Gandhi, does well to remind us that for Gandhi, religion was life.[32] He had to be concerned with the whole of it, whether this meant digging pits for night soil, applying mud packs, working the spinning wheel, or fighting a law case. Brown says that this was true religion for Gandhi as much as following the *Gītā*, although this writer supects that Gandhi would not have made any differentiation here.

## II. The Place of Nonviolence in Gandhi's Career

The place of non-harmful resistance to British rule and policies in the *satyagrahas* that were instrumental in helping to bring about India's independence from England was certainly a central part of Gandhi's career. There were many factors involved in India's final achievement of Independence, but the effect that Gandhi-led nonviolent action had on the collective conscience of the British, concerning the righteousness of their control over India, was far from the least of these factors.

One way to discern the significance of nonviolence in Gandhi's *satyagraha* practices is to look at what Gandhi said about the importance of nonviolence in his conception of what the *satyagraha* ideal is. The place of truth in *satyagraha* is already firmly established, by the presence of the very word *satya* (truth) in the word. What rermains to be seen is how *ahiṁsā* (nonviolence) fits into the picture.

What one finds is that in the heart of Gandhi's career, nonviolence becomes intimately connected with truth as the two fundamental dimensions of *satyagraha*. By the time he had completed his autobiography in 1925, he had arrived at a well-formulated connection between the two:

> My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth. And if every page of these chapters does not proclaim to the reader that the only means for realisation of Truth is Ahimsa, I shall deem all my labour in writing these chapters to have been in vain...The little fleeting glimpses therefore that I have been able to have of Truth can hardly convey an idea of the indescribable lustre of Truth...But this much I can say with assurance, as a result of all of my experiments, that a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realisation of Ahimsa. To see the universal and all-pervading spirit of Truth face to face, one must be able to love the meanest creation as oneself...Ahimsa is the farthest limit of humility.[33]

In Gandhi's mind the origins of *satyagraha* lay in the nonviolence taught by the Vaiṣṇava Hindu tradition of his youth, the Christ of the Gospels, and Raychandbai's and Tolstoy's teachings. As an integral part of *satyagraha, ahiṁsā* became central to Gandhi's vision of truth. It alone could safeguard truth in all situations, particularly those of conflict. Moreover, it alone could preserve the integrity involved because it would not force those against whom it was used to abandon their understanding of truth, while those who used nonviolent means would be strengthened and purified by their use. In as early a work as *Hind Swaraj* (1909), he wrote that nonviolence as displayed in *satyagraha* both "blesses him who uses it and against whom it is used."[34] Gandhi was adamantly against the belief that the end justifies any means; for him wrong means invariably corrupted the end. Believing this, Gandhi held strongly to nonviolence as the one universally valid and applicable means, because it could never distort the end, which was truth. As Judith M. Brown points out, nonviolent means were in a real sense the goal itself. The end was sought for in the action.[35]

Writing in *Young India* six years later, Gandhi seemed even surer of the connection between truth and nonviolence, and had arrived at a conclusion concerning the effectiveness of pairing the two in the movement towards independence:

> There is no such thing as defect or despair in the dictionary of a man who bases his life on Truth and Non-violence...Truth and Non-violence are per-

haps the activest forces you have in the world. A man who wields sanguinary weapons and is intent upon destroying…his enemies does at least require some rest, and has to lay down his arms for a while every twenty-four hours. He is, therefore, essentially inactive for a certain part of the day. Not so the votary of Truth and Non-violence, for the simple reason that they are not external weapons. They reside in human breasts…The panoplied warrior of Truth and Non-violence is ever and incessantly active.[36]

Just as Gandhi spoke of the energy one receives from reciting and meditating on the *Gītā,* here he emphasizes the power that lies behind truth and nonviolence. In his characterization of the two as the most active forces, Gandhi is also clearly responding to the many who equated nonviolence with passive resistance. On the contrary, Gandhi asserts, it is those who expend physical energy using external weapons who must repair to passivity at some point in the day. Gandhi voiced as much in 1942 when he said that "The underlying belief in such non-violent resistance is that the aggressor will, in time, be mentally and even physically tired of killing non-violent resisters."[37] As for the supposed passivity of nonviolent resistance, Gandhi had this to say towards the end of his life:

> For me *ahimsa* is not disabled; it is not weak; it is supreme. Where there is *ahimsa* there is Truth, and Truth is God. How God manifests himself I do not know. All I know is that he is all-pervading and where he is all is well. Therefore there is one law for all. Whenever in the world Truth and ahimsa reign there is perfect peace and perfect happiness.[38]

To Gandhi, the most powerful and courageous people were those who saw the world as one family and understood that only love overcomes hatred.

Eventually, Gandhi became completely assured in the conviction that nonviolence was the absolutely essential component in pursuit of truth:

> It is perhaps clear form the foregoing that without ahimsa it is not possible to seek and find Truth. *Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them…Nevertheless, *ahimsa* is the means and Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so *ahimsa* becomes our supreme duty and Truth becomes God for us.[39]

J.T.F. Jordens, in commenting upon this quotation, says that here we see Gandhi placing *ahiṁsā* at the very core or religious endeavor, recognizing it

as the fundamental means by which Truth, or, more accurately, *mokṣa*[40] that is, can be achieved.[41] Jordens is correct in seeing the religious dimension in Gandhi's words, but truth for Gandhi was never only transcendent spiritual reality, for it was also social and political justice and liberty. As he once put it, "The first condition of non-violence is justice all round in every department of life."[42] Thus, *ahiṁsā* became part of his campaigns for India's independence. The main reason why he applied *ahiṁsā* in this arena was that he was convinced of the moral force that resulted from its practice. It had the power to move minds and hearts. This is evidenced by a speech on ashram vows, delivered in Madras in 1916: "If you express love—*ahimsa*—in such a manner that it impresses itself indelibly upon your so-called enemy, he must return that love."[43] As D.G. Tendulkar rightly maintains in his biography on Gandhi, Gandhi's ambition was nothing less than the conversion of the British through non-violence, so as to make them see the wrong they have done in India.[44]

While Gandhi was successful in attaining this goal, nothing caused him greater despair than the violence between many Hindus and Muslims during and after Independence and Partition between India and Pakistan, despite the aging Gandhi's strongest efforts to draw upon the sources of power he knew and practiced best, fasting and nonviolence.

So, nonviolence was the main component in Gandhi's conception and carrying out of *satyagraha.* It was a principle that he was exposed to from his youth, with its Vaiṣṇava and Jain influences, and it was a technique he employed throughout his career, up through the Hindu-Muslim clashes of Partition.

## III. Gandhi's Authority in Interpreting the *Gītā*

So far, we have established the central role that the *Gītā* and *ahiṁsā* played in Gandhi's life. Next, we will examine what arguments Gandhi was able to make for nonviolence based on his interpretation of the *Gītā.* But before we turn to this, it is necessary to consider what authority Gandhi felt he had to interpret the *Gītā,* as well as what manner of interpretation he applied with respect to the *Gītā.* This is necessary because, as we saw in Part I, Gandhi was not afraid to make bold assertions about the *Gītā* and its place in Hinduism, and Hindu authorities, in reaction, often did not hesitate to criticize his ideas, particularly the idea most relevant to this essay, that the *Gītā* was a text that taught nonviolence, not violence.

Writing in *Navijan* in 1925, Gandhi presented an article entitled "Meaning of the *Gita.*"[45] This document primarily deals with how one should interpret, who has the right to interpret, and what is the basic meaning of the text.[46] Previously, he had already stated that it is by no means a given that present Shankaracharyas and Shastris can offer a correct interpretation of Hindu scriptures.[47] In this article, Gandhi addresses the question of who could claim to be the true interpreters of the *śāstras:*

> For understanding the Shastras, one must have a well-cultivated moral sensibility and experience in the practice of their truths…Anyone who offers to interpret the Shastras must have observed the prescribed disciplines in his life…Learned men may please themselves and draw seemingly profound meanings from the Shastras, but what they offer is not the real sense of these. Only those who have experience in the practice of their truths can explain the real meaning of the Shastras.[48]

As is clear from the passage, experience is what is believed to be the factor which provides one with the authority to interpret sacred texts. One must have practiced the disciplines that the texts teach in order to truly understand them. Gandhi claimed for himself the right to interpret the *Gītā* as he saw fit because he had met the only principle for authority that mattered to him: for years he had put into practice the teachings of the *Gītā.* Based upon this, Gandhi not only claimed the right to interpretation, but also amply exercised it by his composition of three lengthy commentaries. Gandhi often claimed that his own interpretation of the *Gītā* had "stood the test of experience," and added, "you will readily admit, I am sure, that learned commentaries are of much less value than the experience of one with limited intelligence."[49] Even after he had read the commentaries of Śaṅkara, Jñāneshwar, Tilak, and Aurobindo, he maintained this conviction.[50]

Gandhi was not only concerned with hermeneutic authenticity, but also with scriptural authority. He was interested in how one can discriminate between what is true and what is false in the *śāstras.* Not surprisingly, truth and nonviolence were high on the list of criteria:

> Any interpretation of a Shastra which is opposed to truth cannot be right. For a person who would question the truth, the Shastras are no better than ordinary books.[51]

As we now know, truth was practically synonymous with nonviolence for

Gandhi, and so he continues:

> Anyone…who does not find the principle of non-violence in the Shastras is indeed in danger, but his case is not hopeless. Truth is a positive value, while non-violence is a negative value. Truth affirms. Non-violence forbids something that is real enough…Even so, the highest dharma for us is that nothing but non-violence can be. The spirit of non-violence alone will reveal to one the true meaning of the Shastras.[52]

In the same commentary, Gandhi offers a second rule to be followed in determining the meaning of a *śāstra,* and that is that one should not stick to the letter of a text, but try to understand its spirit and its meaning in total context. In the case of the *Gītā,* this meant that while it was literally set within a battle, the battle is only an occasion for teaching the spirit, which is the realization of *brahman.*[53]

Gandhi's insistence on following the spirit over the letter led him to a very open-ended approach to interpreting the *Gītā.* To begin with, Gandhi famously stated on several occasions that consistency was not of utmost importance to him:

> …I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly…What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he still has faith in my sanity, he would do well to chose the later of the two on the same subject.[54]

Gandhi also justified his open-ended approach to the *Gītā* by describing it as a work that had an endless capacity to bring up new meanings. As such, he thought that one should not see the work as offering up any limited, definitive, or final meanings. Gandhi was especially sensitive, if not defensive, about this when it came to the subject of *ahiṁsā,* which many of his critics saw as being almost absent from the text. In response, Gandhi maintained that it is not required to probe the mind of the author as to his limitations on *ahiṁsā.* Like all great poems, the *Gītā*'s meaning is limitless and changing over time. Gandhi gave the example that at one time in India, the word "sacrifice" meant only animal sacrifice, but at different points in the *Gītā* "sacrifice" means the acts of God, physical labor for service, and

several other things. As another example, the word *sannyāsa* or "renunciation" also changes, from the complete cessation of all activity to the *Gītā*'s meaning of relinquishing the fruits of action.[55]

In offering new interpretations, Gandhi defended himself as taking part in a long-standing Hindu tradition. He claimed that what he had done was put a new but natural and logical interpretation upon the whole teaching of the *Gītā*. Just as the *Gītā* had put the implications of previous Hindu writings into concrete shape, he had endeavored,

> "in light of my own experience in trying to live the teachings of Hinduism as interpreted in the *Gītā*, to give an extended but in no way strained meaning to Hinduism...What I have done is perfectly historical. I have followed in the footsteps of our forefathers."[56]

For example, these forefathers, Gandhi explained, took the practice of animal sacrifice and reinterpreted sacrifice to mean abnegation of our baser self. Gandhi suggested that he was following this progression in Hinduism as an ever-evolving and changing religion and concludes, "I hold that the logical outcome of the teaching of the *Gita* is decidely for peace at the price of life itself. It is the highest aspiration of the human species."[57]

In believing that the *Gītā* could offer up new meanings, Gandhi felt that he had the license to pick and choose from the text. As we will see in the next section, Gandhi quite consistently gave his own interpretation of the *Gītā*, finding in it many of the beliefs and practices he held most strongly, such as nonviolence, and using it as a vehicle to further ideas he had developed previously. So, it was often the case that Gandhi first developed or adopted certain ideals, like nonviolence, and then read them into his favorite text. For example, he came to call the *Gītā*'s third chapter a "gospel of service," although the text, while glorifying action in the form of class duty and selflessness, never once uses the word "service."[58]

Gandhi wanted to read into the *Gītā* a process of growth that he wished to see in Hinduism as he conceived of it. His refusal to remain confined by any established, traditional ways of interpreting the *Gītā* is revealed in the following:

> For me, the *Gita* is the ship, not because it is a learned work but because I have liked it, it has appealed to me in my old age, or because some verse in it has been a great support to me, put it any way you like.[59]

## IV. Gandhi, the *Bhagavad-gītā*, and Nonviolence

It is in Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gītā* that we see him mostly reading his own preconceived ideas about nonviolence into the text.[60] In spite of the demonstrated facts that nonviolence was absolutely central to his conception of truth and his practice of *satyagraha,* and that the *Bhagavad-gītā* was the single most important book for him, we find Gandhi often challenged to argue for nonviolence from the *Gītā.* Nevertheless, he endeavored to make several persuasive arguments for the *Gītā* being a text that promoted nonviolence, even given Krishna's explicit instructions for Arjuna to fight.[61] At times, Gandhi was so hard-pressed to find a place in the *Gītā* for his nonviolent philosophy, that he backed away, saying that the work's focus was not primarily on nonviolence. Writing in response to a writer in *Harijan* who said that Hinduism has never stood against violence, and "that it is no good straining everything into an allegory for this object," Gandhi agrees, and admits that he has had to create a reading of the *Gītā* that supports a nonviolent stance:

> I have admitted in my introduction to the *Gita* known as Anasakti Yoga[62] that it is not a treatise on non-violence nor was it written to condemn war. Hindusim…has certainly not condemned war as I do.[63]

At other points, Gandhi maintains that the *Gītā*'s central focus lies elsewhere than nonviolence:

> The object of the *Gītā* appears to me to be the showing of the most excellent way to attain self-realization. That matchless way is the renunciation of the fruits of action. This renunciation is the central sun around which devotion, knowledge, and the rest revolve like planets.[64]

Still, even when giving central place to a practice other than nonviolence, Gandhi usually managed to emphasize the equal importance of *ahiṁsā.* Writing further on renunciation of the fruit of action as the central theme of the *Gītā,* Gandhi again appealed to his assumed privileged status as an interpreter of sacred works, writing,

> Let it be granted that according to the letter of the *Gita* it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after forty years' unremitting endeavor fully to enforce the teaching of the *Gita* in my own life, I have, in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observation of *ahimsa* in every shape and form.[65]

Renunciation of the fruits of action can also be seen as pacifist in that its practice makes

> man's life simple, and from that simpleness comes peace...When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa*. Behind any instance of untruth or violence there can be found the desire to attain the cherished end.[66]

Elsewhere, Gandhi wrote that the *Gītā* need not promote nonviolence as its central teaching, because the principle of *ahiṁsā* had already been established prior to the composition of the *Gītā*, and so there was no point in the *Gītā* further championing it.

Nevertheless, there were many occasions upon which he insisted that *ahiṁsā* was a major message in the *Gītā*. In a piece entitled "Central Teaching of the *Gita*," when asked if the central teaching of the *Gītā* was selfless action or nonviolence, Gandhi responded,

> I have no doubt that it is *anasakti*—selfless action...And *anasakti* transcends *ahimsa*. He who would be *anasakta* (selfless) has necessarily to practice non-violence, in order to attain the state of selflessness. *Ahimsa* is, therefore, a necessary preliminary, it is included in *anasakti*, it does not go beyond it.

Then Gandhi was asked if the *Gītā* taught both *hiṁsā* and *ahiṁsā*. Gandhi, yet again drawing on his authority to interpret, replied,

> I do not read that meaning in the *Gita*. It is quite likely that the author did not write it to inculcate *ahimsa*, but as a commentator draws innumerable interpretations from a poetic text, even so I interpret the *Gita* to mean that if its central teaching is *anasakti*, it also teaches *ahimsa*.

When the interlocutor then pointed out that when Arjuna utters the pacifist resolve of refusing to fight, Lord Krishna teaches him to answer blow with blow, Gandhi disagreed, arguing that Krishna is pointing out to Arjuna that his position is pretentious. Arjuna has shown himself to be violent without the slightest compunction, Gandhi says, and would even today strike down an enemy if he was not his kinsman. Gandhi states that he can even now picture in his mind the red-eyed anger of Arjuna. So, Gandhi continues, Arjuna does not represent the position of nonviolence, but rather is simply fearful of the karmic consequences of killing his relatives

and teachers.[67] It is wrong, Gandhi concludes, to say that the *Gītā* as a whole teaches violence or even justifies war because Krishna gives advice to kill on a particular occasion. It is just as wrong as saying that *hiṁsā* is the law of life because a certain amount of it is inevitable in daily life. Krishna knew Arjuna's mind and thus his violents ways, and so he realized that Arjuna could not become nonviolent all at once.[68]

Gandhi's most well-known argument for the *Gītā* being a text which teaches nonviolence is his interpretation of the fight that takes place between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas as an allegory for every person's battle between the pure and impure within us all. As Gandhi put it, the "*Mahabharata* depicts for all time the eternal struggle that goes on daily between good and evil in the human breast."[69]

Gandhi claimed that ever since his first acquaintance with the *Gītā* in 1889, he felt that it was not an historical work, but was rather one that uses the guise of warfare to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. That preliminary intuition, Gandhi said, became more confirmed upon a closer study of religion and the *Gītā*.[70] Elaborating on this, Gandhi wrote that

> I regard Duryodhana and his party as the baser impulses in many, and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body. An eternal battle is going on between the two camps and the poet seer has vividly described it. Krishna is the Dweller within, ever whispering in a pure heart.[71]

Developing these ideas more fully, and drawing out his allegorical interpretation, Gandhi said that in the *Gītā*, as in life,

> The real battle is to fight against sense objects. The wise man draws his senses away from sense objects like a tortoise draws in his limbs. To do this one must turn his eyes inward and realize God. One who looks upon God as the goal and surrenders his all to God keeps his senses in control and is a yogi stable in spirit. This keeps him from musing on the objects of sense as others do. For those who do not master their senses in such a way, musing on the sense objects gives rise to an attachment for them. From attachment arises desire, and when desire is thwarted he gets angry. He thus behaves in a disorderly manner and comes to an ignoble end.[72]

In his reading of chapter sixteen of the *Gītā* in the very same commentary, Gandhi interprets this chapter as a summary of the "divine and demoniac

natures" that are juxtaposed in the *Gītā*. While the demoniac person thinks, "'I get this today; I will get that tomorrow. I killed this one enemy today; I will also kill others,'" the person of divine nature is characterized by "evenness of temper, nonviolence, truth, peacefulness, compassion to all living beings, gentleness and freedom from malice."[73]

As can be seen in the last two passages, Gandhi, in the heart of his allegorical reading of the *Gītā*, saw two sides at odds in the internal struggle being depicted: The desirous, hateful, and violent side, and the detached, liberated, kind and nonviolent side. Indeed, Gandhi maintained that the author used a war-like illustration in the *Gītā* so that people for whom violence was not taboo could observe the contradiction between the violent and the nonviolent.[74]

Just as Gandhi assigned the purported author of the *Gītā*, Vyāsa, agency by considering the work an allegorical creation, not an historical account, Gandhi also gave Vyāsa credit in other ways for contributing to the *Gītā*'s nonviolent tone. First, Gandhi argued that even if it is difficult to reconcile certain verses from the epic with nonviolence, it remains very difficult to set the whole of the *Gītā* in the framework of violence, since so much of its content is free from descriptions of war and justifications of violence.[75] Second, Gandhi asserted that as a whole the *Mahābhārata* was an epic that demonstrated the tragedy and purposelessness of war. With respect to this, Gandhi said,

> The author of the *Mahabharata*, of which the *Gita* is a part...has shown to the world the futility of war by giving the victors an empty glory, leaving but seven victors alive out of millions said to be engaged in the fight in which unnamable atrocities were used on either side.[76]

At the end of Vyāsa's epic, Gandhi pointed out, the supposed victors are left only to shed tears of sorrow and repentance over the violence that has been committed.

Besides the "divine" characteristics that typified the person who drew from the *Gītā*'s teachings, another quality that was closely related to nonviolence for Gandhi was non-attachment. For Gandhi, the movement of nonviolent non-cooperation was essentially based in the *Gītā*'s teaching of non-attachment:

> The movement is essentially religious. The business of every go fearing man is to disassociate himself from evil in total disregard of consequences.

He must have faith in a good deed producing a good result: that in my opinion is the *Gita* doctrine of work without attachment. He knows it is better to die in the way of God than to live in the way of Satan...And we cannot do better than following out, fearlessly and with confidence, the open and honourable programme of non-violence and sacrifice that we have mapped for ourselves.[77]

Gandhi's interpretation of non-attachment as taught by the *Gītā* was also one which provided *satyagrahis* with resolve, for to be detached from the fruits of actions was not to be ignorant or disregarding or disowning of them, according to Gandhi. As he put it,

> To be detached is never to abandon action because the contemplated result may not follow. On the contrary, it is proof of immovable faith in the certainty of the contemplated result following in due course.[78]

So, renunciation of or non-attachment to the fruit of action did not mean lack of fruit for the renouncer. As a matter of fact, Gandhi held that one who renounces the fruit of action, in the sense of not hankering after the fruit, reaps a thousand-fold reward.[79] Furthermore, Gandhi believed that according to the *Gītā*'s teaching of non-attachment, no violent act could ever be done, for any instance of violence "will be found to have at its back ...the desire to attain the cherished end."[80] Such violent acts are of the lowest order. Based on the teachings of Sāṁkhya philosophy found in the *Gītā*, Gandhi spoke of three kinds of action: sattvika (pure) action is that done with no desire for personal gains; rajasa (passionate) action is that done with desire for enjoyment; and tamasa (ignorant) action is that done with no thought given to violent or injurious consequences.[81]

Besides non-attachment, the *Gītā* also taught, according to Gandhi, a non-discrimination which led to peace and nonviolence. In his *Discourses on the Gita*, Gandhi described the true devotee as one who bears no hatred toward any living being, looking upon all with love and forgiveness: "He never molests his fellow creatures; these are therefore never afraid of him."[82] Later in the same work, he describes the person who follows the *Gītā* as an even-minded man of selfless action who serves all beings, whether Brahmin or dog, with equal devotion. He does not honor any one of them or treat any of them with contempt. If the *Gītā*'s way of non-discrimination had been followed, Gandhi believed, none of the violent actions which took place between Hindus and Muslims, actions which Gandhi dreaded and regret-

ted so greatly, would have taken place:

> He who swears by the *Gita* may know no distinction between Hindu and Musalman, for Lord Krishna has declared that he who adores God in a true spirit by whatsoever name adores Him. The path of bhakti, karma, love as expounded in the *Gita*, leaves no room for despising of man by man.[83]

Finally, just as Gandhi saw the *Gītā* as the quintessence of sacred scripture, he also identified a core teaching within the *Gītā* itself, namely the final nineteen verses of chapter two, which discuss the ideal person, known as the *sthitaprajña* or "one whose wisdom is established." He went so far as to maintain that these verses summarized the most important lessons that the *Gītā* had to offer, and that with the end of the second chapter, the *Gītā* effectively comes to completion.[84] And just as he said that anything not found in the *Gītā* is un-Hindu, he held that people should reject any part of the *Gītā* which bore a meaning contrary to those nineteen verses.[85]

From as far back as his studies of the *Gītā* in a South African jail in 1908-09, Gandhi was deeply inspired by these verses and their ideals of equanimity and non-hatred. Writing on these verses and how they related to nonviolence, Gandhi said,

> The message of the *Gita* is to be found in the second chapter where Krishna speaks of a balanced mind, of mental equipoise. In nineteen verses at the close he explains how this state can be achieved. It can be achieved, he tells us, after killing your passions. It is not possible to kill your brother after having killed all your passions.[86]

Gandhi made it a point to note that the second chapter teaches nothing about the rules of warfare, but instead has to do with how a perfected man who "has nothing to do with physical warfare" is to be known.[87] In perhaps his most assertive statement concerning the *Gītā* as a text of nonviolence, Gandhi maintained,

> That the overall teaching of the *Gita* is not violence but non-violence is amply demonstrated from the argument which begins in the second chapter and is summarized in the concluding eighteenth chapter.[88] Violence is not possible unless one is driven by anger, by ignorant passion, and by hatred. The *Gita* wants us to be incapable of anger and strives to carry us to a state beyond *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*,[89] a state that excludes feelings of anger, hatred, etc.[90]

## Conclusion

Gandhi often came under fire for his unusual assertions about and interpretations of the *Gītā*. The doubts about the legitimacy of his interpretations sometimes had an effect on Gandhi, as we see him occasionally retreating from his usual position that the place of nonviolence was central to a correct understanding of the *Gītā*. However, undoubtedly bolstered by his confident conviction that those who actually endeavor to experientially practice the *Gītā*'s teachings are in the best position to arrive at a valid understanding of them, Gandhi came back to make some strong arguments that nonviolence belonged alongside self-realization, renunciation of the fruits of action, non-attachment, and mental equipoise as the foremost lessons of his most cherished text.[91] Nevertheless, while it seems clear that Gandhi's championing of the *Gītā* has been a major factor in accounting for the *Gītā*'s vast popularity in the last century, among both Hindus and Western scholars, it remains to be seen if his interpretations will place him in the ranks of those commentators on the *Gītā*. who have received the most attention.

## Endnotes

1. Although Gandhi never formally joined the Theosophist Society, he was influenced by its teachings, such as those found in Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy*.

2. Gandhi, M.K., *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 67.

3. *Young India* 11 December 1925.

4. *An Autobiography*, p. 67.

5. Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavadgita* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p. 9.

6. *An Autobiography*, p. 264.

7. Brown, Judith M., *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 70.

8. Jordens, J.T.F., *Gandhi's Religion: A Homespun Shawl* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 129.

9. These three works are *Discourses on the Gita, Anusakti (The Gospel of Selfless Action)*, and *Letters on the Gita (The Bhagavadgita)*.

10. Brown, p. 177.

11. *Satyagraha*, literally meaning "grasping the truth," was usually translated by

Gandhi as "truth force." It was thus a form of moral power in a person's or group's life. The term also was applied to various forms of individual or mass acts of nonviolent civil resistance or disobedience in the social and political realms.

12. Jordens, p. 82.

13. *The Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (CWMG hereafter), 15:288.

14. A *satyagrahi* is one who posseses *satyagraha* and/or takes part in a *satyagraha*.

15. Brown, p. 244.

16. Gandhi said that in the *Gītā* "that matchless remedy is renunciation of the fruits of action. Gandhi, M.K., *The Message of the Gita* (Ahmedabad: Navijan Publishing House, 1959), p. 9.

17. Brown, p. 285.

18. *The Message of the Gita*, p. 9.

19. *An Autobiography*, p. 452.

20. *An Autobiography*, p. 265.

21. Jordens, p. 125.

22. CWMG, 28:316; 51:344; 56:341.

23. CWMG, 53:396; 51:344.

24. *Harijan* 16 December 1939.

25. *Young India* 25 August 1927.

26. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita*, pp.298-299.

27. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 299.

28. ambrosia

29. past, present, and future

30. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 299.

31. *Young India* 11 November 1930.

32. Brown, p. 94.

33. *An Autobiography*, pp. 503-505.

34. CWMG 10:55.

35. Brown, p. 84.

36. *Young India* 31 December 1931.

37. *Harijan* 12 April 1942.

38. *Harijan* 29 September 1946.

39. CWMG 44: 59.

40. spiritual liberation.

41. Jordens, p. 234.

42. *Harijan* 4 May 1940.

43. CWMG 13: 229.

44. Tendulkar, D.G., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* (Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1969), p. 17.

45. CWMG 28: 314-321.

46. Jordens, p. 130.

47. CWMG 21: 246.

48. CWMG 28: 315-316.

49. CWMG 15: 312-313.

50. Jordens, p. 132.

51. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 11.

52. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 11.

53. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 12.

54. *Harijan* 29 April 1933.

55. Gandhi, M.K., *The Gosperl of Selfless Action or the Gita According to Gandhi* (Roseville, CA: Dry Bones Press, 1946), p. 133.

56. *Harijan* 10 March 1936.

57. *Harijan* 10 March 1936.

58. Jordens, p. 34.

59. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 143.

60. Gandhi himself would have denied this: "Anyway I must disclaim any intention of straining the meaning of Hinduism or the *Gita* to suit any preconceived notions of mine. My notions were the outcome of a study of the *Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads*, etc." *Harijan* 10 March 1936

61. See *Bhagavad-gītā* II: 18 and II: 37, for examples.

62. The English title is *The Gospel of Selfless Action.*

63. *Harijan* 10 March 1936.

64. *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 129.

65. *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 132.

66. *Harijan* 9 January 1940.

67. *Young India* 11 December 1925.

68. *Harijan* 11 February 1939.

69. *Young India* 6 August 1931.

70. *Young India* 11 December 1925.
71. *Discourses on the Gita*, pp. 12-13.
72. *Discourses on the Gita*, p. 59.
73. *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 133.
74. *Young India* 12 November 1925.
75. *Young India* 6 December 1931.
76. *Harijan* 11 February 1939.
77. *Young India* 29 December 1920.
78. *Young India* 15 March 1928.
79. *Young India* 6 August 1931.
80. *Young India* 6 August 1931.
81. *Discourses on the Gita*, pp. 67-68.
82. *Discourses on the Gita*, p. 5.
83. *Young India* 9 January 1927.
84. CWMG 71: 29.
85. CWMG 28: 316.
86. *Discourses on the Gita*, p. 73.
87. *Young India* 6 August 1931.
88. Next to the second chapter, the eighteenth chapter was the most important chapter in the *Gītā* for Gandhi.
89. Purity, passion, and ignorance. According to the Sāṁkhya school of philosophy, every individual is made up of differing portions of these three qualities, with the latter two being especially conducive to unthinking, passionate conduct in this world.
90. *Young India* 12 November 1925.
91. Interestingly, Gandhi seems not to have place a great deal of emphasis on bhakti (devotion) as one the foremost aspects of the *Gītā*.

# *AHIṀSĀ* AND THE *BHAGAVAD-GITA*: A GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

Nicholas Sutton

In addition to his role as a campaigner for Indian independence from British rule, Mohandas K. Gandhi must be recognised as one of the great teachers of modern Hinduism, offering an interpretation of the tradition that placed nonviolence and non-harming at the very heart of its religious ideals. It is perhaps inappropriate to regard him as a political leader at all, for he was rather a religious teacher who put his spiritual convictions into practice in the political domain. Gandhi has always been a figure of controversy and remains so to this day. He was among the most important Hindu teachers of this century and yet he was himself murdered by devout Hindus.

He claimed that nonviolence, literally *ahiṁsā* ("not harming"), was the ultimate goal of Hindu religiosity, though Hinduism in its totality has never advocated nonviolence. And he frequently asserted that his most profound religious inspiration came from the text of the *Bhagavad-gītā,* a work that has as its initial premise the view that righteous violence must never be abandoned.

This paradox of the preacher of *ahiṁsā* deriving his principal religious inspiration from a text that encourages the use of violence will be explored and, hopefully, explained in this chapter through an examination both of Gandhi's religious teachings and the doctrines propounded by the *Bhagavad-gītā.* This discussion is significant not just for the study of Hinduism or Indology but because it also leads inevitably into a consideration of broader issues concerning the ethical use of violent means. Therefore, in my final section I will move on from a specific consideration of Gandhi and the *Gītā* and attempt to draw into focus the more fundamental questions that arise from that discussion.


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## Gandhi and Hinduism

Though in his earlier life he flirted with Christianity, there is no doubt that Gandhi regarded himself as a Hindu and the "religion of nonviolence" that he taught as being the very essence of Hindu belief.

> My love for nonviolence is superior to every other thing mundane or supra-mundane. It is equalled only by my love for truth which is synonymous with nonviolence through which alone I can see and reach the truth.[1]

He was, of course, well aware of the strands of Hindu thought in which certain types of violence are quite clearly approved of. We may note in passing the prayers of the *Ṛg Veda* which beseech the gods for victory in battle, the iconographies of the Hindu Deities which typically show them equipped with ferocious weapons, and the stories of the sacred Hindu epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, and of the *Purāṇas*, which extol the warlike actions of both human heroes and of the great Deities of Hinduism, Viṣṇu, Śiva and the Goddess.

Perhaps most significant are the Hindu teachings on social dharma contained in *dharma-śāstras* such as the *Manu-smṛti* and exemplified in the stories told by the epics and *Purāṇas*. Here it is quite explicitly stated that for one of the social classes, the *kṣatriya* or warrior caste, it is a religious duty to practise and execute acts of violence in order to protect society from wrongdoers within and from external plunderers of the kingdom. In such teachings, it is clearly argued that without a virile and aggressive ruling class, human society will become like that of the fish where the powerful destroy the weak without any form of restraint.

How then was Gandhi able to claim that his "religion of nonviolence" was the essence of Hinduism, when it was so obviously contradicted by significant strands of traditional Hindu thought? Firstly, the emphasis on *ahiṁsā* as fundamental to spiritual attainment was not Gandhi's invention. As early as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* we find *ahiṁsā* listed as one of the great virtues to be practised by the seeker after enlightenment (3.17.4). Furthermore, in those passages of the *Mahābhārata* which discuss the quest for salvation it is stated on a number of occasions that nonviolence is the very pinnacle of religious attainment: *manasā karmaṇā vācā nāparadhyanti kasyacit*, 'they never give offence with their mind, actions or speech' (12.222.12), here speaking of those who are enlightened; *anṛśaṁṣaṁ paro dharmaḥ*, 'not injuring is the highest form of dharma' (12.316.12); and *ahiṁsā lakṣano dharmo*

*hiṁsā cādharma-lakṣaṇaḥ*, 'not harming is the mark of dharma, causing harm is a mark of the absence of dharma' (14.43.19), the latter statement virtually mirroring Gandhi's own ideal.

What we are confronted with here is of course the great problem in defining or discussing Hinduism, a religion that is quite different from the other major religious traditions in that it has no founder, no canonical scriptures and no central authority structure. It is in reality a grouping of overlapping yet autonomous traditions that frequently propound alternative and even contradictory doctrines. The attitude of Gandhi and other modern Hindu teachers (perhaps most notably Vivekānanda) to the diversity and contradictions within the traditions they inherited was to argue that Hinduism as a whole represented a hierarchical pyramid of beliefs. Different beliefs and practices are offered as a reflection of the different stages of spiritual development of individuals. Hence, what is right and appropriate for one Hindu is not so for another at a different stage. For Gandhi, the very highest stage of spiritual progression is that represented by an attitude of total and absolute *ahiṁsā* and where Hindu teachings seem to advocate violence it is because they are offering an inferior form of religion appropriate for the less advanced.

In this he is following the various ascetic strands of Indian thought, which include some which are today regarded as outside the domain of Hinduism, such as the Jains, Buddhists and Ājīvakas. They also urge that although the path they offer, based on the renunciation of material desires, is the highest, it is not practical for all people. Therefore those on a lower level should engage in other forms of religiosity in order to gradually elevate themselves, perhaps over several lifetimes, to a position from which they can aspire towards the topmost goal of enlightenment and salvation. For Gandhi *ahiṁsā* was that absolute goal, even though he accepted that it was a concept one should strive towards rather than something one could realistically expect to practise on a daily basis.

> Perfect non-violence is impossible as long as we exist physically. Perfect non-violence whilst you are inhabiting the body is only a theory like Euclid's point or a straight line, but we have to endeavour every moment of our lives.[2]

*Ahiṁsā* represents the stage at which the baser impulses in human beings are finally conquered and the full manifestation of the spiritual being emerges. It is the status of enlightenment and emancipation. The absence

of this pure state of being is symptomised by desire, anger and greed—*kāma, krodha* and *lobha*—and it is these that are always the causes of violence towards others. Violence arises out of hatred and hatred is the result of greed and thwarted desire, which inevitably lead to the anger and frustration that are the seed beds of human violence. In the passage of the *Bhagavad-gītā* which Gandhi said was 'inscribed on the tablet of my heart' this process is explained precisely.

> Whilst thinking about one's objects of pleasure, attachment for them comes into being. From attachment comes desire and anger arises from desire. Because of anger there is complete illusion, and due to this illusion one's power of recollection is distorted. Due to the distortion of the power of memory one's intellect is fractured and when the intellect is fractured everything is lost. (2.62-63)[3]

When desire and greed are completely uprooted, hatred of others and the concomitant acts of violence will vanish automatically. Hence, for Gandhi, enlightenment is nonviolence, and nonviolence is enlightenment, the ultimate goal of the religious quest. Here Gandhi is not differing to any significant degree from the teachings of the ascetic strands of Indian thought. What was original, however, was his conviction that *ahiṁsā* was to be practised by all human beings, regardless of their spiritual or material status.

> The religion of nonviolence is not merely for rishis and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Nonviolence is the law for our species as violence is the law of the brute.[4]

The traditional Hindu view has always been that the ascetic way, including absolute nonviolence, was only to be accepted by those few who were ready to follow such a path. Gandhi, perhaps influenced by Christian universalism, broke with this tradition and urged that *ahiṁsā* should now be integrated into the lives of all those Hindus who would follow his ideals.

## Gandhi and the *Bhagavad-gītā*

It is Gandhi's insistence on the universal adherence to the ideal of *ahiṁsā* that presents the greatest problems in reconciling his notion of spiritual perfection with that of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. On many occasions Gandhi stressed his devotion to the *Gītā* and claimed that its teachings were the

inspiration for his struggles to achieve justice and nonviolence. The problem of course is that the *Gītā* has nothing at all to say about social justice and throughout the text Krishna insists that for Arjuna it is a religious duty to wage war. The *Bhagavad-gītā* is a relatively short passage containing only 700 verses that is found in the *Bhīṣma-parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. The epic narrative has reached the point at which the final conflict is about to take place on the field of Kurukṣetra between the righteous Pāṇḍava faction and their dishonest and adharmic cousins, the Kauravas. As the armies line up in their battle phalanxes, Arjuna, the third of the Pāṇḍava brothers and the greatest warrior amongst them, suffers a crisis of resolve. He convinces himself that it is wrong to wage war against relatives, including many of the elders of the family who are always to be respected and never opposed. It is then that his friend and chariot driver, Krishna, whom the text reveals as a manifestation on Earth of the Supreme Deity, Vishnu or Nārāyaṇa, offers instruction to the irresolute Arjuna. As a result of these teachings Arjuna is convinced that it is righteous and in accordance with dharma that he should destroy the wrongdoers and their allies in battle. It is this instruction in eighteen chapters that is known as the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Traditionally, the *Gītā* has had a high status in Indian religious thought and virtually all the major Hindu theologians have regarded it as authoritative and offered commentaries on its text, perhaps most notably Śaṁkara, Rāmānuja and Madhva. In the modern era the *Gītā* has retained its high profile amongst Hindu and Western religious thinkers alike and it is therefore no surprise that when as a young man Gandhi began to take a serious interest in Hindu ideas it was to the *Bhagavad-gītā* that he turned first. The inspiration that he gained from it remained with him throughout his life. He claimed that at one time he knew by heart thirteen of the eighteen chapters of the Sanskrit text and that its teachings were a constant source of guidance in both his religious and political life.

> When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and I see not one ray of hope on the horizon, I turn to the *Bhagavad-gītā*, and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow.[5]

The paradox here is very obvious: how did a religious teacher who made nonviolence his highest principle gain his greatest inspiration from a text that clearly teaches that violence is at times righteous?

Gandhi himself was well aware of the paradox, particularly as there were other opponents of British rule in India who used violence and sabotage against their oppressors, claiming that such actions were legitimated by the religious sanction of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Gandhi offers two explanations as to how his own ideas were consonant with the teachings of the *Gītā*. Firstly, he suggests that the battlefield setting and the two sets of opponents should be taken as allegorical rather than literal.

> I regard Duryodhana and his party as the baser impulses in man and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body.[6]

Any such interpretation is, however, highly problematical for it ignores the fact that the *Bhagavad-gītā* is very much concerned with real acts of violence and is seeking a resolution of the problem of karma and the righteous use of violent means. Furthermore, this mode of exegesis allows any commentator to hang his or her own ideas onto any religious literature regardless of the ideas the text is truly seeking to impart. Of course, every individual is entitled to take from any text the inspiration he or she finds within it. But it is hard to accept that either the *Gītā* or the wider text of the *Mahābhārata* portrayed its characters as metaphorical representations of human sentiments. The ethical dilemmas centring on violence and social action are very real ones and it is precisely these issues that both texts are exploring. Therefore to attempt to impose such an allegorical interpretation on the *Bhagavad-gītā* is to miss the point of its arguments.

Gandhi's second point is, however, worthy of more serious note.

> But to say that the *Gita* teaches violence or justifies war because advice to kill was given on a particular occasion is as wrong as to say that *himsa* is the law of life because a certain amount of it is inevitable in daily life. To one who reads the spirit of the *Gita*, it teaches the secret of nonviolence, the secret of realising the self through the physical body.[7]

Here he is urging that although the specific teaching at that time was that Arjuna must fight, the more general and hence universal doctrines of the *Gītā* should impel us in the opposite direction. Krishna repeatedly stresses that although one should act as a matter of duty, one must also rid oneself of all selfish desire. In Gandhi's view it is such desire that is the root cause of violent acts against others and hence because the *Gītā* instructs us to

transcend such materialistic impulses it is thereby fundamentally teaching a very real doctrine of nonviolence.

I wish now to examine the validity of this claim by attempting to establish precisely the attitude of the *Bhagavad-gītā* towards acts of violence. Firstly, we must accept that in the case of Arjuna there can be no doubt that it is Krishna's opinion that it is right and proper that he should wage war. Using imperatives such as *tasmād yudhyasva*—"therefore you should wage war" —Krishna on several occasions presents this as the practical conclusion of the doctrines he is setting forth (2.18, 2.37, 2.38, 3.30, 8.7, 11.34). Moreover when the *Mahābhārata* moves on with its story after the *Gītā* has been spoken, Arjuna takes up his weapons once more and fights throughout the eighteen days of the conflict that ensues.

There are several reasons given as to why it is proper for Arjuna to fight, which may be classified under four broad headings—dharma, *ātman, mokṣa* and bhakti.

**1. Dharma**

In verses 31-38 of the second chapter it is argued that because Arjuna is born in a *kṣatriya* family it is therefore his social dharma to rule and to fight against wrongdoers. To abandon such action is to abandon dharma and therefore such renunciation is irreligious. Warriors welcome the opportunity for righteous warfare for it allows them to express their virtue—*sukhinaḥ kṣatriyāḥ pārtha labhante yuddham īdṛśam* (2.31). The appeal here is also to pride and self-interest and Krishna quickly moves his argument on from this point and does not return to this line of thought anywhere in the text.

**2. Ātman**

From a more esoteric perspective, Krishna argues that death is an illusion (2.12-30). The *ātman* or true self is immortal and untouchable and so however many adversaries Arjuna destroys—none of them will truly die.

> *nainaṁ chindanti śastrāṇi nainaṁ dahati pāvakah*
> *na cainaṁ kledayanty āpo na śoṣayati mārutaḥ*
>
> Weapons cannot cut through the soul, fire cannot burn the soul, water cannot make it wet and the wind cannot make it dry. (2.23)

The *Bhagavad-gītā* holds the Sāṁkhya view of the individual being, urging a dualistic perspective that draws an absolute distinction between the body

and the embodied soul, *deha* and *dehin* or *śarīra* and *śarīrin*. Hence, the very notion of killing another person is an illusion, for the true self will never die but will move on to another form of embodiment. If an act of violence is performed it takes place only in terms of the external covering of the true being, for the soul within remains always transcendental to the violence of this world.

**3. Mokṣa**

Despite its initial recourse to an argument based on social dharma, it is apparent that the *Gītā* is primarily concerned with the attainment of *mokṣa*, absolute salvation, which remains its highest religious priority (its seven hundred verses contain no less than sixty-six references to gaining freedom from this world). It is therefore appropriate that we examine in some detail the relationship the *Gītā* draws between the attainment of salvation and the use of violent means.

Throughout its eighteen chapters, the *Bhagavad-gītā* confirms the traditional ascetic values of renouncing material pleasures and transcending desire, greed and anger. As a part of such teachings Krishna, somewhat surprisingly, praises *ahiṁsā*, both as one of the constituents of true knowledge (13.7) and as one of the qualities displayed by those who are virtuous by nature (16.2). Furthermore, it is asserted that the enlightened souls never envy anyone and are merciful friends to all beings—*adveṣṭā sarva-bhūtānāṁ maitraḥ karuṇa eva ca* (12.13); they remain undisturbed in all circumstances and do not distinguish between friends and enemies (12.14, 6.9).

Hence if Gandhi's respect for the *Bhagavad-gītā* is paradoxical it may be that the paradox lies within the text itself rather than in his attitude towards it. To understand this apparent internal contradiction, I think it is necessary to make some attempt at suggesting the *sitz im leben* in which the *Gītā* was composed. My own suggestion, presented elsewhere,[8] is that the debate over royal dharma and ascetic values contained in the *Gītā* and throughout the *Mahābhārata* must reflect actual controversies that existed during the epic period, which may roughly be dated at 300BCE to 300CE. We know from inscriptions of the period that a number of the major rulers of the time, perhaps most notably Aśoka, were influenced by ascetic teachers of Buddhism, Jainism and other doctrines that recommend the abandonment of all material desires in the quest for absolute salvation.

Clearly, if the ruler of a kingdom decides to follow a religious path that insists on the renunciation of violence, problems will inevitably follow in

terms of punishment of criminals and defense of the realm. It is virtually impossible to see how one could continue to perform the royal duties that are essential for the prosperity of the kingdom and at the same time follow the ascetic path to *mokṣa*. In my view, one of principal intentions of the *Gītā* is to demonstrate how it is possible for an individual to fulfil the obligations of royal dharma, including the necessary acts of violence, whilst at the same time pursuing the ascetic imperative towards salvation.

Within Indian religious thought there is a major tension over the definition of dharma. Is it the ritual actions derived from one's *varṇa,* which ensure the continuing stability of the social order, or is it the lifestyle and practices that allow an individual to gain personal salvation from rebirth? This tension is a principal theme of the *Mahābhārata*'s religious thought, appearing most notably in the debates centring around Yudhiṣṭhira's reluctance to wage war but also in the *mokṣa-dharma* teachings presented in the second half of the *Śānti-parvan*. This conflict of ideals is fundamental to any understanding of the doctrines of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the key to its attitude towards the use of violent means. As noted above, there can be no doubt that the *Gītā* holds the view that the attainment of salvation is the highest goal of human existence, but it is unwilling to allow that the means of attaining this goal must axiomatically entail the renunciation of social responsibilities. In other passages of the epic such renunciation is recommended but it is clear that the *Gītā* holds the view that social order and social prosperity are not considerations that can be ignored.

Therefore it attempts a reconciliation of these two apparently contradictory strands of thought and it does this by appealing to a novel form of Yoga. Within the *Bhagavad-gītā* and in the *Mokṣa-dharma-parvan* of the *Mahābhārata,* Yoga is identified as the specific techniques that are practised by the adept in his pursuit of salvation. Most typically these techniques involve inner contemplation and control of the breathing process, as described in Chapters Six and Eight of the *Gītā*. However, these practices are to be undertaken outside the boundaries of society by those who have abandoned their community—*rahasi sthitaḥ* (6.10) or *vivikta-sevī* (18.52)—and so they are unsuitable for a king who remains *in situ*. Therefore, the *Bhagavad-gītā* offers the alternative of a Karma-yoga, which it also refers to as Buddhi-yoga. This doctrine is set out most fully in Chapters Three and Four but it is a theme that recurs constantly throughout the text. In this process the adept does not abandon his social position but rather performs the duties incumbent upon him in a mood of complete detachment. Like

the ascetic who has renounced the world, he has no desire for sensual gratification and executes his prescribed actions, including necessary acts of violence, with complete dispassion. Action of this type generates no future reactions and hence no future rebirth. It is no longer action at all, in this wider sense, but a technique for winning salvation, a form of *mokṣa-dharma.*

Thus the *Gītā* finds a reconciliation of the tensions between renunciation and duty. It accepts that salvation is the true goal, and it accepts that salvation can be gained only by abandoning desire. But it reinterprets social duty as a means of gaining salvation rather than a means of gaining material well being. Above all the *Bhagavad-gītā* will not allow the quest for salvation to be wholly world-indifferent, for it cannot accept that the collapse of the social order is of no concern at all in the doctrines *mokṣa-dharma.* Krishna therefore cites the example of Janaka as a king who gained a state of perfection whilst retaining his royal status and urges Arjuna that he should consider the situation of human society and then perform his social duty by waging war—*loka-saṁgraham evāpi saṁpaśyan kartum arhasi.* (3.20).

Significantly, this line of thought switches the focus from the action and its consequences to the motive with which it is performed, although there is a presumption that dharmic action benefits the whole of society. As Krishna repeatedly assures Arjuna that actions performed as duty alone will not generate future karma (2.47, 4.20-22), we find little if any concern for the consequences of the action. Indeed, in Chapter Eighteen, we find an almost antinomian disregard for the results of one's deeds.

> *yasya nāhaṁkṛto bhāvo buddhir yasya na lipyate*
> *hatvāpi sa imāḷ lokān na hanti na nibadhyate*
>
> One whose nature is free from pride and whose intellect is free from attachment does not truly kill anyone and is not bound by his actions even if he destroys this entire world. (18.17)

According to this ideology a member of the royal order may continue to rule his domain and if necessary engage in acts of violence, but at the same time follow the ascetic path, provided he remains mentally aloof from the activities he is duty bound to perform. I am quite certain that here the *Bhagavad-gītā* is not engaged merely in some abstract theoretical debate, but is confronting issues of vital significance for the kings of the epic period. It offers the means by which they could pursue the highest spiritual goals without abandoning their obligations to society as a whole, which

inevitably included the use of violent means. In this respect, it is correct to regard the *Gītā* as presenting a Hindu doctrine of a just war that includes acceptable circumstances both from the perspective of social welfare and from that of individual spiritual progress.

Here one may note the work of G. W. Kaveeshvar on the ethics of the *Bhagavad-gītā* in which he accurately identifies the dual axis the text employs in its ethical teachings, stressing both the nature of the action performed, which must be in accordance with social duty, and the motive that underlies it, which must be devoid of selfish desire, greed and anger.[9] When applied to the use of violent means this offers a definition of a just war as one which is undertaken to protect the innocent and punish wrongdoers and is performed without any desire for personal material advantage.

**4. Bhakti**

Where the *Gītā* introduces theistic concepts into its patterns of thought, the ideals of bhakti absorb those of *mokṣa* and dharma. Thus devotion to the Supreme Deity is presented as the highest form of Yoga (6.47) because the grace of the Deity is invoked in the quest for salvation (12.6-7). Similarly, the dharmic acts referred to in the second chapter are identified not merely as duty but as acts of devotion. We find a clear statement to this effect in the eighteenth chapter:

> *yataḥ pravṛttir bhūtānāṁ yena sarvam idam tatam*
> *sva-karmaṇā tam abhyarcya siddhiṁ vindati mānavaḥ*
>
> The Supreme Deity is he from whom the origin of the living beings arises and by whom all this world is pervaded. After worshipping him by the execution of one's dharmic duty, a human being reaches the state of perfection. (18.46)

Hence, acts of violence performed with complete detachment as social duty are not only a part of a Yoga technique but also a means of worshipping the Deity and invoking his grace. Krishna claims that he is the creator of social dharma—*cātur-varṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭam* (4.13)—and hence the use of violence as and when it is dictated by the rules of such dharma is a manifestation of bhakti.

Furthermore, the *Bhagavad-gītā* takes the argument a step further when establishing the control of the Deity over the individual destiny of every living being. As Arjuna is hesitant to cause the deaths of those he loves and

venerates, Krishna reveals that he alone possesses real control over their fate. In the cosmic revelation described in the eleventh chapter, Arjuna sees both his allies and adversaries being crushed in the mouths of God. He is then informed that the fate of these warriors is already determined by the will of the Deity and he is no more than an instrument in the process—*may-aivaite nihitāḥ pūrvam eva nimitta-mātraṁ bhava* (11.33). Here it may be that the *Gītā* is referring to the wider narrative of the *Mahābhārata* and to Krishna's specific mission as an *avatāra*. However, the indication seems to be that every individual meets with death at the time and place decreed by his or her individual destiny as ordained by the Deity. It is for this reason that the actual slayer is no more than an instrument of the divine will that lies behind every act of fate.

In summary then, the *Bhagavad-gītā* supports its view that Arjuna should perform the acts of violence required of him at Kurukṣetra on the following grounds: 1. It is his duty as a *kṣatriya* to fight battles in a righteous cause. This is his *sva-dharma*. 2. The notion of death must be reappraised in light of the understanding that the true self, the *ātman*, is an eternal entity that survives the destruction of the body. 3. When dharmic action is performed without desire it does not generate the karma that binds one to rebirth and hence such action is not a barrier to *mokṣa*. In fact, prescribed acts of violence performed with a detached state of consciousness form part of a soteriological technique equivalent to meditation or breath control. 4. Such action is also to be understood as a means of worshipping the Supreme Deity and thereby invoking his grace in the quest for salvation. Furthermore, birth and death take place by the will of God. Human beings are merely his instruments in this process.

We are now in a position to examine the extent to which Gandhi's ideals of nonviolence are consonant with the doctrines expounded by the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Of course, Gandhi did not share the above analysis of the *Gītā*'s teachings and so does not address the points directly. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify or at least infer his attitude towards them. When the question of dharma is raised, Gandhi is unequivocal. He identifies dharma as 'virtue' and only accepts the status of the *sva-dharma* referred to in Chapter Two of the *Gītā* when it corresponds to his understanding of virtue. Hence there can be no doubt that if it were to be asserted that warrior dharma entails acts of violence, he would respond by arguing that it is in conflict with virtue and should therefore be abandoned. This was precisely his line of argument when it was pointed out to him that a woman's

dharma was to marry as a child and be always subservient to her husband:

> There should therefore be some authoritative body that would revise all that passes under the name of scripture, expurgate all the texts that have no moral value or are contrary to the fundamentals of religion and morality, and present such an edition for the guidance of Hindus.[10]

Gandhi never applied such ideas to the teachings of the *Gītā* but it is clear that he did not feel himself bound by the traditional ideas of *sva-dharma.*

Gandhi undoubtedly shared the *Gītā*'s dualistic understanding of the living being and believed in the presence of the eternal *ātman* within every creature. But he certainly would not regard this an argument that justifies the killing of others. The *Gītā* makes precisely this link in its second chapter (2.30) but it is not a major line of argument and it is not a point that Gandhi ever took up. Similarly, Gandhi displays relatively little interest in the *Bhagavad-gītā* as a devotional work. He certainly believed that righteous action, in particular service to those who suffered, was a means of expressing devotion to the all-pervasive Deity. It was for this precise reason that he renamed the untouchables as 'Harijans,' or 'divine beings.' But here again he stuck to his interpretation of dharma as virtue rather than adherence to the traditional rules that governed the structure of society. And when the *Gītā* teaches that God was ordering the deaths of all the warriors at Kurukṣetra he includes that as a part of his understanding of the 'particular occasion' on which Arjuna was ordered to fight. In other words, God was directing the deaths of these warriors, but this order has to be set in the context of an *avatāra* story where the Deity appears on earth and not broadened to include all acts of violence that take place in this world.

The primary concern of the *Bhagavad-gītā* is, however, the path to salvation and this is congruent with Gandhi's ideas on the spiritual transformation of the individual. It is in this area, which for both is of primary importance, that there appears to be the most significant interaction of ideas. On one level at least, there is a large degree of agreement between them, for Gandhi shares the view of the *Gītā* that motive is of crucial significance in assessing the violence (or nonviolence) of an action. He cites the surgeon cutting open a patient and the killing of a maimed calf to end its suffering as examples where apparent acts of violence are in fact the embodiment of *ahiṁsā* because the motive is entirely for the welfare of the object of the action. He even extends this principle to a rabid dog that enters a village or

monkeys that threatened the ability of his *āśrama* to function.

> To cause pain or wish ill or to take the life of any being out anger or selfish intent is *himsā*. On the other hand, after calm and clear judgement, to kill or cause pain to a living being with a view to its spiritual or physical benefit from a pure, selfless intent may the purest form of *ahimsā*. Each case must be tested individually on its own merits. The final test as to its violence or nonviolence is after all the intent underlying the act.[11]

Hence for Gandhi and the *Gītā* the motive of the actor is the key criterion in judging whether or not an action accords with the principle of nonviolence. On this basis it may be accepted that he is justified in contending that his own ideas are consonant with the philosophy of the work he so revered. In his view, the violence of Arjuna was urged by Krishna because it was to be performed in one of those rare instances in which an apparently violent act was in fact an expression of *ahimsā*. This was so firstly because Arjuna was to perform his duty without any trace of selfish desire, greed or anger, and secondly because the destruction of the Kauravas was divinely ordained and would bring about the welfare of the entire world. Arjuna was thus able to perform such acts and yet still attain the highest level of spiritual development. In this appreciation of the *Gītā*'s ideas, Gandhi's interpretation is probably very close to the voice of the original text.

Where Gandhi might be accused of misconstruing the *Gītā*'s message is in his perception that the teaching to Arjuna is not to be taken as a precedent for other violent acts. It was for that occasion only, when, as the *Mahābhārata* makes clear, extraordinary circumstances of cosmic significance had arisen. As mentioned previously, my own view is that the author of the *Gītā* intended that his work should serve as guidance to kings in indicating to them how they might continue to resort to necessary violence without thereby debarring themselves from the path to salvation. In other words, the author of the *Gītā* held the view that the use of violent means by kings was essential for the preservation of human society, a position which Gandhi rejected utterly and as a result refused to see the *Bhagavad-gītā* in this light.

In truth the *Bhagavad-gītā* is more pragmatic and perhaps more realistic in its view of the world than Gandhi was. Gandhi believed that both social and individual perfection could be attained through the total abandonment of violence, while the *Gītā* holds fast to the Dharma-śāstric and Artha-śāstric notion that without recourse to violence society will disintegrate.

Hence the *Gītā* shares Gandhi's view that the causes of violence—desire, attachment, greed and anger—be removed from one's consciousness, but differs from him by arguing that the use of violence in a detached manner is essential. Both recognize the need to root out the passions that generally cause the violence that exists in the world, but the *Gītā* does not accept that this can lead to a world that is wholly nonviolent. It seems that the particular occasion for violence that Gandhi refers to was that which occasioned the descent of the divine *avatāra,* an event that is rare indeed. Although the *Gītā* should properly be understood in this context, it seems almost certain that it regarded its teachings on the dispassionate use of violence as applicable to all righteous kings.

## The Wider Picture

In the difference of perspective between Gandhi and the *Gītā* that I have suggested here, we have, I believe, the core of the dilemma over the ethical use of violence. Although I think that to some extent Gandhi misreads the real intention of the text, I am not unsympathetic towards his deviance. For the *Bhagavad-gītā* and for the entire dharma-śāstric tradition in Hinduism, violence is an unwelcome necessity that must be accepted and employed for the maintenance of the social order upon which all beings depend for their welfare. However repugnant such violent acts may be, the alternative to their use is far worse, for the total abnegation of recourse to violence would merely allow those who are criminal, aggressive and deviant to trample in unrestrained fashion on the innocent masses. It is an argument based on realism rather than lofty ideals and one, I think, with which all of us might readily identify.

For Gandhi, however, this point of view is unacceptable. In his view, violence represents the degradation of the human spirit and hence the acceptance of violence can lead only to the degradation of humanity. To oppose those who use violence with further violent acts means that everyone sinks to the level of the wrongdoers. Furthermore, Gandhi will not accept the utilitarian argument that places absolute stress on the results of actions. For him the end is inseparable from the means and hence a goal achieved by violence can never be the same as that achieved by righteous means.

> Never think for one moment that the end is not shaped by the means.[12]

We may feel that Gandhi's ideology is praiseworthy but too idealistic for

the real world and that some definition of a just war or righteous violence is a necessity. It is worth reflecting, however, that any such doctrine will almost certainly be flawed in its inception and perhaps more importantly provide a vital tool for the propaganda of warmongers.

It is significant to note that even within the *Mahābhārata* there is a later passage in which the *Gītā*'s ideal of righteous violence is demolished by a female ascetic named Sulabhā. This is the *Sulabhā-Janaka-Saṁvāda* (Chapter 308 of the *Śānti-parvan*) in which King Janaka, who is named in the *Bhagavad-gītā* as one who exemplifies the path Krishna teaches, is portrayed instead as a vainglorious braggart. He is a ruler who enjoys the delights of wealth and power whilst at the same time claiming to be more spiritually enlightened than those who renounce such pleasures. Sulabhā's key point to Janaka is that the performance of actions, and especially the waging of war, must axiomatically be accompanied by emotional involvement in terms of desire for gain and victory. The man of war must come to love his allies and loathe his enemies and hence in her view the doctrine of the *Gītā*, expounded in this passage by Janaka himself, is an illusion of sorts, a specious sop to the vanity of kings.

So the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s idea of righteous violence is questioned by other thinkers from within the same tradition, and it is apparent that similar criticism may be applied to any of the world's doctrines of a just war. We may be able to name several such ideals, but we would be hard pressed to name any conflict that has genuinely been fought for unselfish reasons. Rather, because such ideas of righteous violence abound in the world, warmongers are able to pursue their aims through violent means and at the same time claim that their activities are just and honourable. This is what Noam Chomsky describes as the "Visions of Righteousness."

We have created for us the picture of an evil Soviet empire bent on enslaving the free world, or else fiends such as Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Gadaffi, Saddam or Milosevic. So great is the evil that such figures purvey that we are quite justified in launching attacks on the states they rule and even in killing the civilians of those states. Because doctrines of a just war have currency, Henry Kissinger can order bombing attacks that kill hundreds of thousands of innocent Cambodians and yet still be lauded as a great statesman. Such men are never condemned for crimes against humanity but rather receive honourary degrees from Britain's most respected universities. And from the other side, terrorist groups plant bombs that murder and maim but are still able to convince themselves that

they are either servants of God or else building a world free of injustice and oppression. Week by week the bombs rain down on different cities and faceless men and women destroy the lives of their tragic victims, but the killers' consciences can always be put to rest by whatever doctrine of a just war they subscribe to.

There is a very real ethical problem here. We feel instinctively that violence is necessary for the maintenance of the social order we depend upon and we dread the consequences of abandoning the use of violence. Yet the very moment we attempt to construct any doctrine that might explain how and when acts of violence are morally justified, we give license to kill to the warmongers of our world in their pursuit of wealth and power. When the dilemma is set in this light, perhaps Gandhi's view that violence is always evil and should never be sanctioned is in fact the most realistic idea and the conventional approach of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and others in urging us that the wars we wage are righteous is in truth the nighmarish fantasy.

**Endnotes**

1. Gandhi, M.K., *Hindu Dharma*, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 163.
2. Ibid., p. 176.
3. All translations in this chapter are my own.
4. Gandhi, M.K., *Hindu Dharma*, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 162.
5. Cited by Fischer, L., *Gandhi, His Life and Message for the World*, London, 1964, p. 15.
6. Gandhi, M.K., *Hindu Dharma*, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 138.
7. Ibid., pp. 137-138.
8. Sutton, N., 'Aśoka and Yudhiṣṭhira: A Historical Setting for the Ideological Tensions of the Mahābhārata,' *Religion*, Volume 27, No 4, October 1997.
9. Kaveeshwar, G.W., *The Ethics of the Gītā*, Delhi, 1971.
10. Gandhi, M.K., *Hindu Dharma*, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 384.
11. Ibid, p. 195.
12. Ibid, p. 186.

# Meat-Eaters and Grass-Easters
## An Exploration of Human Nature in Kathā and Dharma Literature

Patrick Olivelle

It may not have been always so, but at least since the second half of the 20th century there appears to be a consensus in western countries and among people influenced by liberal and enlightenment values in other parts of the world that differences among peoples can be bridged and conflicts can and indeed should be resolved. This was the guiding principle behind the creation of the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II, and the Nobel Prize for Peace is a symbol of this collective aspiration of humanity. The difficulty of implementing that lofty principle is evident in the former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, in Ruwanda and Somalia, in Sri Lanka and Kashmir, and now in New York and Afghanistan, as well as in numerous other places where ethnicity, language, and religion define internecine conflicts.

But these are practical difficulties amenable to solution, we like to believe; they do not invalidate our basic premise. We continue to have unshakable faith in the principle that all human beings are created equal, that we should judge people by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin. Beneath differences of race, language, belief, dress, and cuisine, we are all brothers and sisters in a single human race. The cry of "égalité" echoes from the French revolution to the women's and civil rights movement.

It is not my intention to challenge this principle; I too am a child of this age and subscribe to that principle. Having lived my adult life in three continents, I consider myself instinctively as a citizen of the world. My question, however, is whether people in the past—and many even today—especially ancient and medieval Indians, also subscribed to such a principle. My


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answer is that such a principle would have been anything but self-evident to them, that the entire social theory of ancient India was, indeed, based on just the opposite—that there are profound and irresolvable differences between social groups, that certain groups of people are in natural conflict with others, conflicts that are by definition not amenable to resolution.

At one level, then, my inquiry will be an exploration of human nature—or better, human natures—within a variety of ancient Indian discourses. This exploration may also throw some secondary light on the anthropological realities facing peace-makers today—human equality, universal human rights, and the erasing of ethnic and religious differences are not self-evident values flowing from our basic human nature but a moral high ground that must be fought for and conquered each day.

## I

Given the focus of this volume, let me begin with the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Its setting, significantly, is a war. The opposing armies are arrayed in battle. Arjuna surveys the scene and, filled with despondency, resolves: "I will not fight" (BhG 2.9). Arjuna's charioteer is Krishna, god become incarnate to reestablish dharma, the normative and normal state of affairs, the moral imperative for human society. Krishna's divine advice fills the rest of the text, and his advice takes the form of an exhortation to fight. God is on the side of war.

Krishna presents many arguments as to why Arjuna must fight, but the most significant, I think, is his assertion that it is Arjuna's *svadharma* as a warrior to fight:

> Recognizing, moreover, that this is your *svadharma*, it is not right for you to vacillate; for there is nothing more splendid for a warrior [Kṣatriya] than a righteous [*dharmya*, "in accordance with dharma"] war. It is a wide-open door to heaven encountered serendipitously; fortunate are the warriors, O Pṛtha, who are presented with such war" (BhG 2.31-32).

The expression *svadharma* means "duty specific to an individual" in terms of intersecting identities: gender, caste, stage of life, and the like. The expression is also firmly rooted in the belief that *svadharma* derives from, or is equivalent to, *svabhāva*, one's own inherent nature. Duty is not merely a contingent moral response to a set of circumstances but a categorical imperative flowing directly from one's innate and immutable nature.[1] One

man's duty to fight is as natural to him as another man's duty not to fight; some are by nature predators, as we will see below, and others are by nature prey. Arjuna's decision not to fight is based on personal moral conscience. Krishna's admonition reminds Arjuna both that dharma is not within the purview of such a conscience and that such a conscientious objection will ultimately prove to be futile; nature is immutable and nature will make us act accordingly irrespective of our feeble efforts[2]:

> Shackled by the activity specific to you, an activity springing from your own nature (*svabhāva*), you will inevitably perform precisely what you foolishly seek to avoid (BhG 18.60)

That one's propensities, activities and duties flow from one's nature and are, therefore, unavoidable, is articulated in an interesting and informative principle repeated frequently in the *Pañcatantra*, a book of animal tales and political insights containing high culture and folk wisdom: there can be no association, the refrain goes, between grass-eaters and meat-eaters.[3] The *Pañcatantra* takes us into the imagined world of animals, a world that quite naturally divides itself into grass-eaters and meat-eaters, into prey and predator. This imagined animal kingdom, however, is a metaphor for human society. The above refrain of the *Pañcatantra* points to an underlying sociological principle: there are some groups in society that are naturally predatory, while others are by nature prey; and there can be no association, alliance or friendship (all of which are indicated by the Sanskrit term *mitratva*) between them. This principle takes up a theme found already in the ancient Vedic texts: the whole world consists of eaters and food—the powerful and the weak, the big fish and the small fish, the oppressors and the oppressed—a theme that has been explored in detail by Brian Smith (1990) and to which I will return later. This sort of situation, moreover, is not contingent; it is not a situation that can or should be changed. It is a natural or cosmogonic fact with which we have to live.

In almost all the stories of the *Pañcatantra* where meat-eaters and grass-eaters strike up a friendship, the grass-eater ends up dead, not so much because of the meat-eater's gluttony or perfidy but because of a variety of circumstances that conspire toward that end. Such incompatible friendships are fated to end disastrously. In the very first and most extensive of the *Pañcatantra* stories, a story that frames much of the book, *Saṁjīvaka*, an ox stranded in the forest becomes close friends with the lion-king Piṅgalaka. In spite of the goodness and good will of both, however, the jackal minister

Damanaka conspires to have Saṁjīvaka killed by Piṅgalaka.

In a parallel story, it is the stranded camel, Kathanaka, who strikes up a friendship with the lion Madotkaṭa. When the lion is injured and unable to procure food for himself or for his entourage, his ministers—a jackal, a leopard, and a crow (all meat eaters)—conspire and the camel ends up on their dinner table (*Pañcatantra*, 46-48).

Then there is the story of the crow who wanted to befriend the wise and learned mouse Hiraṇyaka. The mouse tells the crow:

> The impossible is impossible;
> Only what's possible can a man do;
> carts don't go in water,
> or boats on dry terrain.
>
> The things that are found to join in the world,
> Only those things should the wise seek to join;
> You are the eater, and I am the food;
> what friendship can there be,
> between the two of us?' (*Pañcatantra*, 75)

The belief that there is natural and inborn enmity and conflict between different species is best illustrated by the stories about the mongoose and the snake, stories which every Indian child knows and into whose message they are socialized. Book Five of the *Pañcatantra* (pp. 157-58) contains the famous story of the Brahmin who bludgeons his pet mongoose to death in the mistaken belief that it had eaten his baby boy. The Brahmin leaves the house telling the mongoose to guard the child.

> Not long after the Brahmin had left, the mongoose saw a black cobra coming out of its hole and making its way towards the boy. When he saw the snake, his eyes became blood-shot with anger, and his lips, teeth, and paws quivered vehemently. He sprang at once upon the snake and tore it to pieces. Then, seeing the Brahmin returning, he could not contain his joy and ran outside with bloody mouth and paws to show him what he had done.

The rest, as they say, is history! The mongoose, however, killed the cobra not simply to protect the child but because the two are natural and mortal enemies.

Another story specifically invokes this natural enmity between the mongoose and the snake:

In a certain Arjuna tree there lived a pair of herons. Now, every time they had chicks a huge snake would crawl through a hollow in the tree and devour the chicks even before they had a chance to grow their wings. The male heron became so depressed he lost his mind. He gave up eating, went to the bank of a lake, and sat there despondent.

A crab happened to see him there and said to him: 'Uncle, why do you look so sad today?' The heron told him what had happened, how his chicks had been devoured. The crab comforted him, saying: 'Look, my friend, I know a way to kill the snake. You know the mongoose den. Spread pieces of fish in an unbroken line from their den up to the hole where the snake lives. Greedy for that food, the mongooses are bound to reach that hole and discover the snake. Because of their natural enmity, they are sure to kill it.'

The heron did as he was told. The mongooses followed the track of the fish and, recalling their ancient enmity, killed the snake. (*Pañcatantra*, p, 64)

The *Pañcatantra* posits a similar natural enmity between owls and crows, the conflict between them being the central theme of Book Three dealing with War and Peace. Here the enmity is placed in *illo tempore*, in the mythic times of the beginning, when the birds were electing their king. The owl was about to be anointed as king when a passing crow happened to see this and rashly commented:

Why, where are all the other birds—the swans, the ducks, the ruddy geese, the curlews, the peacocks, the cuckoos, the pigeons, the pheasants? Have they all been wiped out that you would consecrate as king this ugly-looking owl? And further:

With that crooked beak and those squinty eyes,
With a look that is unpleasant and cruel,
His face looks dreadful when he's not enraged;
God knows what he'll do when he's in a rage! (*Pañcatantra*, p. 113)

So started their inborn enmity.

These innate and natural differences breeding deep and abiding enmities are not contingent, like the falling out between friends or lovers. They are not occasioned by specific acts or identifiable behavior patterns. If you are an owl you will not be inclined toward friendly relations with a crow; if you are a mongoose you will try to kill the next snake you happen to come by. This philosophy is nicely encapsulated in the story of the mouse Hiraṇ-

yaka and a crow that I have already mentioned. The mouse expounds the philosophy of friendship and enmity. Natural enemies can never become friends. Hiraṇyaka tells the crow:

> "Look, my man. You are my enemy. So how can you expect me to be friends with you? As it is said:
>
> Never form an alliance with a foe,
> Even though he is closely tied to you.
> water, though very hot,
> will still put a fire out."

The crow: "Come, my friend. How can we be enemies? We haven't even seen each other! Why do you utter such nonsense?"

Hiraṇyaka then smiled and said: "As you know, my friend, scriptures tell us that there are two kinds of enmity in this world, natural and incidental. You happen to be my natural enemy."

The crow: "Describe them to me, sir; I want to hear the defining characteristics of the two types of enemies."

Hiraṇyaka: "Incidental enmity is sparked by a specific cause, and that type of enmity is removed by doing a favor proportionate to that cause. It is totally impossible, however, to remove natural enmity. Natural enmity itself is of two types, enmity from just one side and enmity from both sides."

The crow: "How are they different from one another?"

Hiraṇyaka: "When each would kill the other and each would eat the other, then there is enmity from both sides, because each can cause harm to the other. Such, for example, is the enmity between lions and elephants. When without provocation the one kills and eats the other, while the other does no harm to him, does not injure him, and does not eat him, that is enmity from just one side and for no reason. Such, for example, is the enmity between horses and buffaloes, between cats and mice, and between snakes and mongooses. Does a horse harm a buffalo, or a snake, a mongoose, or a mouse, a cat? So, why try to create an impossible alliance?" (*Pañcatantra*, pp. 76-77)

The lesson in all these stories is that nature and natural propensities always triumph over contingent and accidental qualities such as learning, virtue, inner character and the like. And of course it is possible to fake learning and holiness. The *Pañcatantra* and other similar texts such as the *Hitopadeśa*

are full of stories of hypocritical animals, especially cats and tigers, standing on two-legs gazing at the sun and faking holiness to obtain an easy meal. The *Pañcatantra* does not tire telling us that whatever you do to a dog's tail—oil it, massage it, treat it with heat—it will always return to its natural position; you cannot straighten a dog's tail.

A story that illustrates this principle nicely is that of the mouse turned into a girl (*Pañcatantra*, pp. 131-33). Once a childless Brahmin was taking a bath in the Ganges and a baby mouse fell into his hands from the beak of a falcon. Filled with pity, he changes the mouse into a girl and takes her home to his barren wife. The girl grows up and the Brahmin is determined to give her in marriage to the most powerful of the gods. So he summons the sun, who gives the excuse that the rain cloud is more powerful than he because it covers him. The Brahmin goes to the rain cloud who says that the wind is more powerful because it blows him hither and thither. The wind says that the mountain is more powerful because it cannot shake it. The mountain says that mice are more powerful because they dig holes into it. So the Brahmin finally summons the mouse, but the mouse protests: "How can she enter my tiny hole?" So the Brahmin changes the girl back into a mouse and marries her off. The cosmos conspires to make sure that the mouse reverts to her natural state.

> Giving up the Sun, Rain, Wind, and Mountain,
> who sued to be her husband,
> The mouse-girl reverted to her own kind—
> For one's own nature is hard to transcend. (*Pañcatantra*, p. 131)

The dangers inherent in the interaction between incompatible groups is wonderfully illustrated by the story of "The Crow and the Sparrow," a nursery tale that is told in different versions by mothers to their little children throughout India. Alan Dundes (1997) has produced an interesting study based on this tale offering a Freudian interpretation of caste and untouchability. Here is the simple Kannada version translated by A. K. Ramanujan:

> Sister Crow and Sister Sparrow are friends. Crow has a house of cowdung; Sparrow, one of stone. A big rainstorm washes away Crow's house. So she comes to Sparrow and knocks on her door. Sparrow makes her wait—first because she is feeding her children, later because she is making her husband's and children's bed. Finally she lets her in and offers her several places to sleep. Crow chooses to sleep in the chickpea sacks. All night she

munches chickpea and makes a *katum-katum* noise. Whenever Sparrow asks her what the noise is, Crow says, "Nothing really. Remember, you gave me a betel-nut? I'm biting on it." By morning, she has eaten up all the chickpeas in the sack. She cannot control her bowels, so she fills the sack with her shit before she leaves. Sparrow's children go in the morning to eat some peas, and muck their hands up with Crow's shit.

> Sparrow is angry. When Crow comes back that night to sleep, she (Sparrow) puts a hot iron spatula under her (Crow) and brands her behind. Crow flees, crying *Kā, Kā* in pain.[4]

Even if we do not accept Dundes's Freudian interpretation, this nursery tale is, on the one hand, aimed at socializing children into dangers of association between incompatible groups (sparrow is Brahmin, crow is outcast), and on the other, is a commentary on that very incompatibility. When you become friends with people of other groups and bring them into your home, your food ends up as the others' shit, and you end up with their shit on your hands.

## II

Let me now turn from the colorful stories of the *Pañcatantra* to the dry prescriptions of the Dharmaśāstras. The sociology of the *śāstras* is firmly based on Vedic precedents and ideology. The Puruṣa hymn of the *Ṛgveda* (10.90) has been called the first constitution of India, and its sociological principle has been followed faithfully by the later *śāstras*. It lays down the original cosmogonic reason why society is constructed the way it is, why it is internally differentiated into hierarchically arranged groups. From the Puruṣa offered in sacrifice there emerged the differentiated universe—earth, mid-space, and sky; sun, moon, and stars; animals and birds; horses, cows, goats, and sheep; and most significantly the hierarchical components of society. The four *varṇas* of Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra emerged from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet of the primeval Puruṣa, respectively. Vedic stories of origin are designed to point out the reason why something is constituted the way it is, why something or someone has the particular functions and uses, especially ritual uses, that that thing or person has. Why do we use barley or Udumbara wood in a sacrifice—because, then follows the origin of barley or the Udumbara tree. Likewise, the Puruṣa tale shows the origin of social classes from the primordial sacrifice; their essential natures and their socio-ritual roles are determined by the part of

Puruṣa's body from which they originated. These social classes are as distinct as, or have as diverse natures as, the sun and the moon, earth and sky, horses and cows.

The differentiation of social classes into the powerful and the powerless, into predators and prey, is articulated in the Vedic texts using the metaphor of eaters and food. The Vedic texts repeatedly call the Brahmins and especially the Kṣatriyas—that is, the unified upper crust of society consisting of the priestly and political powers—the eaters, and the Vaiśyas and the Śūdras—that is, the commoner and working classes—the food. The *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* (2.9) contains this petition: "The Brahmin is one mouth of yours [i.e., of the creator god Prajāpati]; with that mouth you eat the kings. Make me a food-eater with that mouth. The king is one mouth of yours; with that mouth you eat the Vaiśyas. Make me a food-eater with that mouth." In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (7.29) we see social hierarchy described from a Kṣatriya viewpoint: a Brahmin is a seeker of food and to be moved at will; a Vaiśya is a tributary to another, eaten by another, oppressed at will; and a Śūdra is the servant of another, removed at will, to be slain at will. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (13.2.9.6-8) compares the common people to the vagina and the royal power to the penis, the people to the corn and the royal power to the deer, juxtaposing nicely the acts of sexual and dietary dominance. The social fact of the higher and the powerful eating the lower and the weak is expressed in the well-known maxim of the fish [*matsyanyāya*], where the big fish eat the small fish. Manu (5.29) articulates this ecological principle well: "The immobile are food for the mobile; the fangless for the fanged; the handless for the handed; and the timid for the brave."

The Puruṣa story is not only narrated or alluded to repeatedly in the Dharma literature, it also serves as the implicit ideological basis for much of the Dharmic social discourse. Manu (1.87) for example states: "As the Brāhmaṇa sprang from his mouth, as he was the first-born, as he possesses the Veda, he is by right the lord of this whole creation." Sheldon Pollock (1993), in his polemical piece "Deep Orientalism?," has noted the racist underpinnings of the *varṇa* and caste systems and the bio-genetic basis of caste differentiation. Whether we agree with Pollock's characterization of caste as "racist" or not, I think it is clear that what would today be called the "biological" or the "genetic" formed the ideological basis for *varṇa* differentiation and of the social ideology in the Dharmaśāstras. Social differentiation and hierarchy are not contingent realities but rooted in the very constitution of social groups. In his study of the Indian philosophical discours-

es on cste, Halbfass (1991, 364) notes:

> The *sāmānyas* [universals] thus signify structures of the universe, biological species, and other basic forms within the real, empirical world that remains unaffected by the periodic desctructions of the world and always reappear at the beginning of a new epoch. For this reason, and in the face of the ancient cosmological associations of the *varṇa* doctrine, it would seem natural that the four castes were also viewed in the sense of such invariable prototypes.

Not all philosophers pursued this path; but some, such as Kumārila, the well-known Mīmāṁsist, did. The use of animal species to represent social groups in folk tales, it appears, is more than mere metaphor; Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas are as different as horses and goats.[5]

Let me offer some examples of this way of thinking. The first one comes not from a Dharmaśāstra but even more tellingly from a grammatical text. The 2nd-century BCE grammarian Patañjali (on Pāṇini 2.2.6) describes a Brāhmaṇa as "white in color, of pure conduct, with hair that is yellowish or reddish brown." Note the connection between outer skin color and inner purity of conduct, a feature common in the Dharma literature, which refers to Śūdras as "the black *varṇa*."[6] Not just the color of the skin differentiated the *varṇas*; each is also assigned different propensities, virtues, and vices. The *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (6.23-24) makes these telling remarks about the difference between a Brahmin and a Śūdra:

> Discipline, austerity, self-control, liberality, truthfulness, purity, vedic learning, compassion, erudition, intelligence, and religious faith—these are the characteristics of a Brahmin.
>
> Bearing long grudges, envy, mendacity, reviling Brahmins, slander, and ruthlessness—these should be recognized as the characteristics of a Śūdra.

Some texts explain the differences between *varṇas* using the Sāṁkhya theory of *guṇas* within the context of rebirth. Manu (12. 42-51) lists groups of beings—animals, mythic demons and gods, and humans—among whom one takes birth depending on one's dominant *guṇa*. Śūdra is listed under beings where *tamas* or darkness predominates; *rajas* or energy dominates in Kṣatriyas; and *sattva* or goodness/light in Brāhmaṇas. Vaiśyas are left out of the list. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (18.41-44) makes the most explicit statement regarding the distribution of *guṇas* among the *varṇas*, the differences in

their inherent nature (*svabhāva*), and the resultant differences in their propensities and proper occupations:

> The activities/occupations (*karmāṇi*) are distributed among Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras, O Paraṁtapa, in accordance with the qualities (*guṇas*) arising from their respective natures (*svabhāva*).
>
> Tranquillity, self-control, austerity, purification, patience, uprightness, knowledge, wisdom, and belief (*āstikya*)—these are a Brāhmaṇa's activities born/resulting from his nature (*svabhāvaja*).
>
> Bravery, ardor, resolve, skill, not fleeing in battle, generosity, and majesty—these are a Kṣatriya's activities born from his nature.
>
> Plowing, cattle herding, and trade are a Vaiśya's activities born from his nature. The activity of service is for the Śūdra also born from his nature.

That social roles and inner dispositions are based on one's nature is nicely illustrated by Manu (8.414), who, while speaking of the emancipation of a Śūdra slave, makes this telling observation:

> Even when he is released by his master, a Śūdra is not freed from his slave status; for that is innate in him and who can remove it from him?

The bio-genetic underpinnings of the Dharma social thought is perhaps best illustrated in its explanation of the so-called mixed *varṇas*, an explanation that was clearly intended to account for the diversity and proliferation of castes (*jāti*) within the ideological framework of the four *varṇas*. This is not the place to describe the system fully, but the basic principle is that the different mixed *varṇas* are generated by intermarriage among the four basic *varṇas*. Thus, the child of a Brahmin father and a Śūdra mother is a Pāraśava, whereas the child of a Śūdra father and a Brahmin mother is a Cāṇḍāla. The hierarchical ordering of these hybrid groups is determined by possibly the most significant rule of Dharmaśāstric classification: the rule of *anuloma* and *pratiloma*. Literally, "along the hair" and "against the hair," paralleling the English "with the grain" and "against the grain," the rule establishes the legitimate and illegitimate directions of sexual relationships. When the male is hierarchically superior to the female, the union is *anuloma* and legitimate, whereas the opposite is *pratiloma* and illegitimate. The untouchable Cāṇḍāla occupying the bottom of the social hierarchy is the product of the worst *pratiloma* union: a male Śūdra having sex with a female

Brāhmaṇa. Just as crossing a horse and a donkey creates the hybrid mule, so the crossing of *varṇas* create the hybrid castes. This is not my own illegitimate inference; it is stated explicitly by Medhātithi, the most renowned commentator of the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra.* At the very beginning of this treatise, the seers ask Manu: "Please, Lord, tell us precisely and in the proper order the Laws of all the social classes, as well as of those born in between" (Manu 1.2). In explaining why the author of the text mentions "those born in between (*antaraprabhava*)" as a separate category, Medhātithi says: "It is improper to list them under the caste (*jāti*) of either the father or the mother. Just as a mule born from the union of a donkey and a horse is neither a donkey nor a horse but a different species (*jāti*)."

In some ways the Dharma ideology assimilates lower castes with outcastes, that is, people who have fallen from their castes due to grievous infractions, thus infusing a moral dimension to caste. This is further sustained by the rebirth ideology according to which sinners are reborn as low caste people.

"To whom does a son belong?"—there has been a long-standing debate about this in India. The question is posed frequently using agricultural imagery: does the son belong to the owner of the seed, that is, the biological father, or to the owner of the field, that is, the husband of the mother? This debate is nicely framed by Vasiṣṭha (17.6-9):

> People are in disagreement, some saying: 'A son belongs to the husband of the woman,' and others: 'A son belongs to the man who fathered him' (A 2.13.5 n.). And they produce evidence in support of both positions:
>
> Position I: 'Even if a bull fathers a hundred calves on someone else's cows, the calves belong to the owner of cows; the bull has spilled his semen in vain.'
>
> Position II: 'Diligently guard this progeny of yours, lest strangers sow their seeds in your field; in the transit to the next world, a son belongs to the man who fathered him. Otherwise a husband makes this progeny of his worthless for himself.'

To put this in modern terms, is "son" a biological or a cultural category? The image of seed and field strongly favors the cultural: you cannot plant a mango seed in someone else's field and lay claim to the fruit of the resultant tree. The fruit belong not to the owner of the seed but to the owner of the field. There is a strong case for considering "son" to be a cultural cre-

ation rather than a biological product. On this is based the Dharmic customs of levirate (*niyoga*), the *putrikā* (that is, the appointment of a daughter to beget a son for her father), and adoption. But in all these we see the biological intruding: in *niyoga* the wife is inseminated by the husband's brother or close relative; in *putrikā* the child is that of one's own daughter married to a man of one's *varṇa;* and one adopts only a close relative or a boy of one's own *varṇa.*

Clearly, biology is an important factor in the social position and the inner character of children. Vasiṣṭha again speaks about the impossibility of hiding one's parentage:

> You can know by their actions all those who have been secretly conceived and who are tainted with the attributes rising from relationships in the inverse order of class (*pratiloma*), because they are devoid of virtue and good conduct. (*Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 18.7)

The irresolvable and innate differences among social groups was not mere theory or theology; it intruded also into the ancient Indian system of criminal justice. A crime is punished not purely on the basis of the crime but on the basis of the social position of the perpetrator and the victim. Equal justice under the law is an untenable position within this ideology. For defaming a Brahmin a Śūdra's tongue is cut out, while a Kṣatriya and a Vaiśya pay different types of fines. "If someone kills a Kṣatriya, he should give a thousand cows to erase the enmity, a hundred if he kills a Vaiśya, and ten if he kills a Śūdra" (*Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 1. 24.1-3). Social position is also a factor in how witnesses in a court of law are interrogated and how their testimony is evaluated. "(The judge) should question a Brahmin, saying 'Speak'; a Kṣatriya, saying 'Speak the truth'; a Vaiśya, with a reference to cows, seeds, and gold; but a Śūdra, with a reference to sins that cause loss of caste" (Manu 8.88).

Note that a Brahmin is expected to speak the truth without being told to do so, whereas a Vaiśya has to swear by his property and a Śūdra is admonished as to the dire consequences of speaking falsely. A Brahmin's testimony also counts for more: 'When witnesses are in disagreement, the king should accept the testimony of the majority; when they are equally divided, the testimony of those distinguished by superior qualities; and when men with superior qualities are in disagreement, the testimony of Brahmins" (Manu 8.73). Inequality before the law is a direct outcome of inequality of nature or *svabhāva.*

To conclude this discussion of *śāstras,* let me cite an interesting example from the grammarian Pāṇini (2.4.9): *yeśāṁ ca virodhaḥ śāśvatikaḥ*—the rule states that *dvandva* (co-ordinative) compounds are declined in the singular (rather than the normal dual) when the two component words refer to entities that are in perpetual opposition to each other. Patañjali, commenting on this *sūtra,* cites these telling examples of such conflicts: *śramaṇabrāhmaṇam* (ascetic and Brahmin) *kākolūkam* (crow and owl); *śvāśṛgālam* (dog and jackal). The later commentary Kāśikā explains *virodha* ("opposition") as *vaira* ("enmity") and gives these examples of such natural and eternal enmity: cat and mouse; snake and mongoose; and horse and buffalo—pairs that we have already encountered in the *Pañcatantra.*

## III

Finally, let me present "the other side." Indian history and literature offer numerous counter-examples to the ideology that I have outlined above, an ideology that I believe was in many respects the dominant one at least and especially within the Brahmanical tradition. Let me once again return to the *Pañcatantra* where the old debate rages over what is more important: nature or nurture, pedigree or character. The crow is still trying to convince the mouse Hiraṇyaka to be his friend, and argues:

> I have listened to all you have said. But still I am single-minded about this; I am going to make friends with you. And I know it is possible, for as it is said:
>
> All metals unite when they're melted down;
> Birds and beasts unite when there is a cause;
> Even fools unite out of fear and greed;
> But righteous people unite at first sight.
>
> What's more,
>
> An evil man is like an earthen pot,
> easy to break, hard to restore;
> A virtuous man is like a golden pot,
> hard to break, easy to restore. (*Pañcatantra,* p. 78)

Verse after verse is cited by various proponents of character in defense of the proposition that a man must be judged by the nobility of his character rather than the accident of his birth:

A man's nobility comes not
from the quality of his birth;
The eminence of mortal men
rests on how they conduct themselves. (*Pañcatantra*, p. 67)

Examples of religious movements aimed at discounting birth are found throughout Indian history, from Buddhism and Jainism to later Bhakti sects. Clearly, this was an argument that was never fully settled either in India or elsewhere in the world.

To present one view as "the Dharmaśāstric position," moreover, does not do justice to the richness of this literature. As I wrote in the introduction to my translation of the four *Dharmasūtras* (Olivelle: 1999),

> The expert tradition of Dharma during the centuries immediately preceding the common era appears to have been vibrant and dynamic as shown by the numerous contradictory opinions of experts recorded in the extant Dharmasūtras. Such diversity of opinion belies the common assumption that ancient Indian society was uniform and stifling under an orthodoxy imposed by Brahmins. If even the experts recorded in these normative texts disagree so vehemently, the reality on the ground must have been even more chaotic and exhilarating.

Parallel to the debate on nature versus nurture is that between fate and human effort, between the activists and the fatalists, whether fate is ascribed to astrological (divine) or karmic forces. Sociologists have pointed to the belief in rebirth and karma as factors in the economic backwardness of South Asian countries and their intractable poverty. Although fate and karma are the central components of the dominant Indian theodicy, the *Pañcatantra* offers fine counter-examples that demonstrate the fallacy of the sociological theory (see Olivelle 1997, xxxvii). Here is the turtle Manthara-ka's advice to the mouse Hiraṇyaka:

To a man who works hard wealth and allies
flock of their own accord,
Like frogs to a pond, and birds to a lake
that is full and well-stocked.

Hard worker, not a procrastinator;
Knows how to act, not addicted to vice;
Brave and grateful, a firm and faithful friend—
Fortune on her own seeks out such a man,
to be her place of residence.

Irresolute, lazy, relying on fate,
And without an ounce of virility—
Fortune dislikes embracing such a man,
Like a sexy young wife, her aged spouse.

Even a fool can gain wealth in this world,
When he is capable of bold action.
No one respects those scared of bold action,
Although they have minds like Bṛhaspati's.
—(*Pañcatantra*, p. 93)

## Concluding Postscript

Arjuna's initial decision not to fight in spite of his warrior status is clearly an expression of individualism, of placing individual conscience above societal demands. It is, furthermore, an affirmation of and an allegiance to a universal ethic (*sādhāraṇadharma*) as opposed to a contextual ethic (*svadharma*), possibly even to an ethic of non-violence (*ahiṁsā*). The literary persona of Arjuna as presented in the *Bhavavad Gītā*—and here we prescind from historical questions—is used to present a theological argument; Arjuna's initial decision is a foil for presenting Krishna's sustained argument in rest of the book.[7]

In the first chapter Arjuna is presented as representing the new religious theology based precisely on the centrality of the individual and the claims of a universal ethic. At the time of the *Gītā* there were historical individuals both within the Brahmanical tradition and especially in the new ascetic movements such as Buddhism and Jainism who espoused similar views. This challenge to the Brahmanical interpretation of human nature, society, social organization, and an individual's place within the social hierarchy was clearly becoming intense after the Aśokan reforms and the growing prominence of these new religions. Krishna's teaching as presented in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is intended to refute these new theologies.

In the rest of the book Arjuna's initial refusal to fight is cast in broader theological terms: the abandonment of ritual and social activities (*karma*), the turning away from one's religious and social obligations (*svadharma*), and the adoption of a non-active mode of live (*saṁnyāsa*). In other words, Arjuna's decision is the occasion for a discourse on the conflict between responsible engagement in activity (*karmayoga*) and its total renunciation (*karmasaṁnyāsa*) and for the exposition of Krishna's teaching against the renunciation of the world (*saṁnyāsa*).

At the end of the book, we find Arjuna acceding to the Brahmanical viewpoint as presented by Krishna. Arjuna returns to his warrior persona and to the battle at hand. As in the hands of the Brahmin the mouse-girl returns to her own nature and finally becomes a mouse, so Arjuna in the hands of the author of the *Bhagavad Gītā* gives up his brief indulgence in individualism and returns to his native warrior nature; the paths of return are different but the outcome is the same.

Beyond the theological arguments for and against a universal ethic and the significance of the individual and his or her aspirations, there is also a belief repeated often in the *Pañcatantra* and in the Dharmaśāstras that it is, in fact, impossible to transcend one's nature. Nature always triumphs over nurture and individual aspirations:

> A dog's curved tail returns to its curved state,
> However much one applies oil or heat. (*Pañcatantra*, p. 35)

Grass-eaters will always be grass-eaters and meat-eaters will always be meat-eaters; there is no possibility of any real or sustained association or friendship between them. Nature (*svabhāva*) defines an individual's habits, activities, and duties. "Far better it is," says the *Gītā* (18.47), "to do one's own duty (*svadharma*) inadequately than another's duty (*paradharma*) perfectly; one incurs no stain by performing the activity determined by one's own nature (*svabhāva*)." Trying to counter one's nature is not only immoral but also futile, as Arjuna and the mouse-girl found out, "for one's own nature is hard to transcend" (*Pañcatantra*, p. 131).

## Endnotes

1. This principle is at the root of the statement in BhG 3.35 that it is better to do one's own duty (*svadharma*) imperfectly than to do someone else's perfectly. On the connection between *svadharma* and *svabhāva*, see also Halbfass 1988: 335.

2. The principle that one's innate nature is impossible to transcend is repeated in the *Mahābhārata* (3.9.11): "The propensity (*śīla*) that a man is born with does not leave him until death."

3. See *Pañcatantra*, pp. 36, 44, 47, 96.

4. Cited from Dundes 1997: 34. Dundes provides texts of several version of this folk tale from different parts of India. Note that I am dealing here only with the ideology of caste and not with the realities of social groups on the ground. The reification

of caste in the Brahmanical ideology is not always matched by the reality on the ground, where there is evidence of social mobility throughout Indian history.

5. See the connection and correlation between different animal species and different *varṇas* in the vedic literature in the detailed study by Brian Smith (1994). On the connection between social power, animal classifications, and dietary regulations, see Olivelle 2002.

6. *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 1.27.11; *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 1.2.11.

7. The *Gītā*'s creation of Arjuna's persona is similar to that of Julius Caesar by Shakespeare or of Jesus by the gospel writers. Indeed, in the Śānti Parvan of the *Mahābhārata,* within the very similar context of Yudhiṣṭhira's refusal to accept the throne, Arjuna plays quite a different role in cajoling his older brother to abandon his faintheartedness.

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# Pursuing the *Gita*: From Gandhi to Doniger

Ramesh N. Rao

Like the Bible and the Koran, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is both a "great book" and a popular best-seller. From scholarly translations to popular presentations, and from esoteric interpretations to psychological analyses, the *Gītā* has attracted lofty praise as well as harsh disparagement. It has evoked from its commentators flights of inspiration and devotion as well as agnostic meanderings and suspicious speculation. The *Gītā* has been translated and commented upon by myriad authors, from Gandhi[1] to Khushwant Singh,[2] and from Annie Besant[3] to Swami Prabhupāda.[4]

Gandhi believed that the *Gītā* was not a historical work but that under the guise of describing warfare it explored and explained the struggle that each person wages within himself or herself. Gandhi saw the *Gītā* as a statement about what is right and wrong, just and unjust, and whether to meet life head-on or to retreat. Others, like Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago, believe that the *Gītā* is a "dishonest book," and that it encourages and celebrates violence and warfare.[5] Gandhi, as is well known, was a proponent of non-violence. He says of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Gītā*: "The author of the *Mahābhārata* has not established the necessity of physical warfare; on the contrary he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance, and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries."[6] Some will dismiss Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gītā* as skewed to fit his own ideas of non-violence, but they will not go to the extent that Professor Doniger does in labeling the work "dishonest." Nor will they blame Krishna (God) for the destruction of the human race, as she does. Given these diverse views, who shall we listen to, and what shall we make of the *Gītā*?

In recent months there has been a resurgence of interest in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. For example, a current movie, "The Legend of Bagger Vance," is a restructured form of the *Gītā* in which the battlefield becomes a golf course. The golf course in question: a foggy, windy Krewe Island off the coast of Sa-


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vannah (Krewe Island = Kurukshetra). The golf-caddy character in the film is a transposed version of Bhagavān Śrī Krishna, his name being a pun on Bhagavān—"Bagger Vance." The caddy encourages the lead character to transcend the physical world to overcome his golfing challenges, *and* the challenges of life. "The Legend of Bagger Vance" goes beyond characterizing golf as a mental game. It sees golf as a metaphor for life, for dealing with conflict, and for understanding one's own desires and weaknesses. The movie, which makes no mention of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is based on a book with the same title,[7] and which more openly, but rather briefly, draws the reader's attention to the *Gītā*. The parallels between *Bagger Vance* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* are clearly brought out in Steven J. Rosen's new book, *Gita on the Green: The Mystical Tradition Behind Bagger Vance*.[8]

A recent newspaper article discusses the parallels between the movie and the *Gītā* at length[9] and reports that Drexel University in Philadelphia sponsored an interdisciplinary course on the *Gītā*. Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago was among the invited lecturers. Doniger, the newspaper reported, told her audience that "the *Bhagavad Gītā* is not as nice a book as some Americans think." Her lecture was titled "The Complicity of God in the Destruction of the Human Race," and according to her, throughout the *Mahābhārata*, the enormous epic of which the *Gītā* is a small part, Krishna goads human beings into murderous and self-destructive behavior—such as senseless war—in order to relieve "mother Earth" of its burdensome human population and the many demons disguised as humans. The report says that Doniger told the audience that the *Gītā* is "a dishonest book; it justifies war." These were indeed "fighting words" from a professor who told the newspaper that she was a pacifist and that she didn't believe in "good" wars.

The newspaper reported that several in the audience objected to Doniger's analysis of the *Gītā*, but that she made no apologies about what she felt about the famed "Celestial Song."[10] Doniger reportedly "begged" her audience to plunge deeper into the Upanishads and other great literature of Hinduism to understand the *Gītā* in its proper context. "Reading the *Bhagavad Gītā* without reading the *Mahābhārata* is like reading the Sermon on the Mount," she said, "without knowing about the Crucifixion." But many found Doniger's characterization of the *Gītā* "appalling," "insulting," and "blatantly anti-Hindu."

Does Doniger's reading of the *Gītā* have merit; should it be taken seriously? Is Doniger's analysis par for the course in Western academe, and do

other scholars and students of Hinduism in the West share her views? The answer is complicated. Still, even a cursory look at the number of English translations of the *Gītā*, and the number of people who have invoked this "song celestial" to understand and describe the tumult of life, reveals a deep respect for the text and an abiding reverence for its teachings. At first glance, then, Doniger's criticism could be taken with a grain of salt. But her views are important and controversial because she is a well-known scholar in the field of Vedic studies, and the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. Her translations of the *Rig Veda*[11] and the *Manusmriti*,[12] for example, are popular best-sellers. She was past president of the 9,000-strong American Academy of Religion (AAR), the scholarly community that sets the agenda for religious studies in the States. Her translations of the Vedas are now standard texts in university courses. Doniger is also the authority on "Goddess" (Hindu) studies, and she has put forth the thesis that the Vedas and all other Indian myths are a collective dream of a society, an expression of its deep unconscious *samskāras*[13] playing out. According to Rajiv Malhotra of the Infinity Foundation,[14] Doniger uses Freudian psychoanalysis to "dissect the Vedic *ṛṣi*-s as sex starved and the *devīs* as the *ṛṣi*-s' fantasies playing out."

For Doniger, myths are neither history nor do they contain universal truths, but are relative "dream truths" for a given people. She believes that by studying a society's myths a reader can understand that society and its peoples better. Therefore, Doniger maintains that she is enhancing Hinduism by analyzing its "myths" and bringing out its hidden truth, and that she does so by using Freudian psychology to "deconstruct" the sexual personas of individuals and societies.

Malhotra points out that Jeffrey Kripal, who wrote the controversial book on Ramakrishna Paramahamsa titled *Kali's Child*,[15] is one of Doniger's students, and that when people complain about Kripal's characterization of Ramakrishna as a homosexual, Kripal, like Doniger, says that it only supports his thesis that there are deep-rooted and unconscious issues that Hindus are uncomfortable discussing. Doniger, says Malhotra, "feels exactly the same way when someone feels they are 'hurt' by her portrayal of Hindu texts and myths." Malhotra, a technologist/entrepreneur, who gave up his business interests to start a foundation which would work towards influencing the Western academic enterprise of "deconstructing" Hinduism, says that Indians/Hindus, instead of complaining or responding emotionally to people like Doniger, should learn to rebut these arguments in a

rational and scholarly manner. He also feels that many Indians are confused about the distinction between the academic study of religion and the faith-based teaching in religious communities, thinking that what is done or taught in an ashram by a Swami or a pandit will counterbalance the Freudian, feminist, and Marxist "deconstruction"of Hinduism. Malhotra also feels that many Hindus do not understand the academic study of religion as it is very much a modern/Western phenomenon.

Religious scholars are biased in the sense that their understanding of a text will be influenced by the approach they use and the beliefs they have. An "insider" and/or a "devotee" of a particular sect or religion will have a particular bias, and an "outsider" and/or "non-devotee" will have certain other biases. It may seem obvious to many Indian observers that Western scholars are of the "outsider/non-devotee" type, but that is not necessarily so. There are Westerners who will not fit that stereotype: there are those who both critically study as well as practice Hinduism. Another aspect of this problem is that scholarship dealing with religious experiences and religious observances uses "reconstruction and suspicion" to interpret texts.[16] Reconstruction is the effort to recover lost or changed texts, while suspicion leads one to try to distinguish the original from the late, and the genuine from the fake. These attempts are themselves influenced by one's "insider" or "outsider" status.

In one sense, "insider" and "outsider" is besides the point. What does the *Gītā* say about itself? And how might we understand what Krishna is really trying to say in this most sacred of Hindu texts?

## "Tāgī": the "Gītā" in Reverse

If one inverts the two syllables that make up "*Gītā*" one gets "Tāgī," which means "to renounce." It is said that Ramakrishna Paramahamsa used to tell his students that the mere invoking of names did not constitute the practice of faith.[17] "Repeat the word *Gītā* ten times and it begins to sound like 'Tāgī'," he told his students. Just as the sound can be reversed to show the "nonsense" aspect of human language, the thesis itself can be stood on its head to show the "nonsense" version of human wisdom and quest. So, if indeed the *Gītā* is a call to war and destruction, as Doniger claims, what would the *Gītā* be like if it were "reversed" to fit the "pacifist" ideology that Doniger purportedly believes in? Krishna would perforce have to tell Arjuna, when Arjuna lays down his bow saying that victory, kingdom and

fame are all meaningless, that it is better to be killed by the Kauravas than to fight in a fratricidal war. The imaginary dialog might go like this[18]:

> Long have I waited for these words of wisdom from you, O Bharata
> Ambition and pride have brought you to the brink of disaster
> Providence gave you many chances to renounce your patrimony
> None of them did you take, hence this sorry pass
>
> Know that this world created by Me is Māyā, illusion
> With nothing in it worth fighting for
> Let alone worth killing for
> Surrender to the sons of Dhritarashtra!
>
> Persuade your brothers to do the same.
> If they will not, abandon them.
> Their reliance on you is no reason to sin.
> If you must fight, do so with your eyes shut
> So that you will not see the staircase to Hell
> Built of the bodies of each one who falls to your arrows
>
> But better is to walk away from this battlefield
> To some secluded cave or lonely peak
> Where I shall reveal to you the splendor of your immortal soul
> And the hollowness of the world.
>
> Know that I am strung through this world
> Like the thread in a necklace of pearls.
> And anything that seems good or splendorous or bright
> Is but a particle of My Being—Krishna the Trickster!
>
> Seek to know the three qualities, *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*
> And strive to rise beyond them
> The tamasic will do anything to get what they want
> It is best to yield to them
>
> The rajasic think they can distinguish right from wrong
> And seek to act accordingly—this is delusion, Māyā.
> The sattvic know that life is futile.
> Empty your pockets and walk away from it.
>
> You may recognize my true devotee as follows…
> He owns nothing but a lion cloth, so no one covets what he has
> And he never has to fight
> He never defends himself, knowing the futility of this life.
> He blesses those who would slay him

As facilitating the inevitable
Possession-less, family-less, unfettered he wanders
Proclaiming My Truth through the futility of his life

Come, Arjuna, let us follow this path!"

Would such advice coming from Krishna make him the "good," pacifist God that scholars like Doniger wish to celebrate? Is this Krishna closer to Christ, who sought to turn the other cheek when slapped, or to Gandhi who sought to follow Christ's injunctions on these matters? Most probably, yes. Would it appeal to a lot of people? Maybe. Does it make sense? It only makes sense to those who are fanatical about their pacifism, and who don't see the illogic of their position in the face of life-annihilating violence. Tens of millions have died and killed in the name of Christ, and Gandhi's call to non-violence was not only resented by many but it led to the immense and brutal violence following the partition of India. Moreover, and ironically, Doniger's characterization of the *Gītā* as "a dishonest book" is itself a violent act which all but negates her claim of being a pacifist.

## Gītā for the Beginner

If we are not to succumb to simplistic characterizations of the *Gītā,* it is imperative that those approaching it for the first time have a basic understanding of the "advice" that Krishna offers Arjuna at Kurukshetra. It is equally important to understand Arjuna's dilemma, and how he chose to respond to Krishna given his distinct circumstances on a battlefield. Scholars, historians, and religious practitioners have reflected and commented upon the *Bhagavad Gītā* throughout the millennia, but, due to space considerations, I will here only briefly summarize what they have said about it.[19]

The *Gītā* is a many-layered, complex, and multi-faceted "lesson plan" to teach human beings how to live their lives wisely.[20] It includes not only mythical and metaphysical dimensions, but also esoteric, ethical, and philosophical components. Every Hindu, and most Indians, know that the *Gītā* is presented in the form of a dialog between Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna feels weary and confused, and he is deeply distressed about fighting his cousins, uncles and friends, who are in the opposing army. Krishna, his charioteer, the embodiment of spiritual wisdom, counsels Arjuna about right action and about fighting the "just war" without fear and without concern for the results.

The most important theme in the *Gītā* is that we should not shirk from doing our duties. What makes the performance of one's duties difficult is when there is unpleasantness associated with it, or when there is some conflict between the discharge of one's duties and one's personal desires and interests. Engaging in battle is about as unpleasant as it gets, and the thought of killing one's relatives, teachers, and friends poses the most serious dilemma that one can face in life. Yet, if such a situation arises, the *Gītā* insists, we need to sacrifice our own needs and desires (usually born of self-pity and faint heartedness), and do what is incumbent upon us.

Arjuna is, like any intelligent and caring human being, baffled by this dilemma: is it proper and just to harm or kill fellow human beings, including relatives, teachers, and friends, if indeed they are on the side of evil and unrighteousness? This reminds us that no matter how intelligent we are, it is difficult to find answers to ultimate questions pertaining to proper action and righteousness. That the dialog between Krishna and Arjuna occurs on the battlefield should remind us that questions of right and wrong, of good and bad, become significant not in the context-less world of the academic's ivory tower but in the midst of life's real battles. Scholars, and not just Gandhi, have pointed out that the battle of Kurukshetra is also a metaphor for the struggles that each one wages within himself or herself about good and bad, and about right and wrong.

The *Gītā,* it is also said, is a great work of Sāṅkhya.[21] Others argue that it does not propound any one particular philosophical system but rather allows various readings. Krishna expounds on and recommends a variety of paths to enlightenment. He extolls ritualism and meditation, recommends action with detachment (*nishkāma karma*), and praises the pursuit of knowledge and pious devotion. This is the great diversity and eclecticism of Hinduism.The *Gītā* also reveals that there are various ways to find fulfillment in life, for no one path may be suitable for all.

The essence of the *Gītā* is that there is perceived duality in the cosmos, consisting of *prakriti* (or the external world of Nature) and *purusha* (the timeless divine principle that pervades the universe). In everything we do, apart from physical sustenance, we need to seek communion with the supraphysical, Krishna advises. Self-centered acts, therefore, amount to very little in the cosmic scheme of things. If anything, they blur an individual's vision of the grander goals of life. This recognition comes from a deeper understanding of one's Self, which is the intangible center of

our innermost experience. The Self, in the embodied state, goes through cycles of life before merging with the Absolute.

Let me conclude this section by saying that the *Gītā* contains a condensed form of knowledge which is described in detail in all the six shāstras. Just as the Lord "Hari" is the essence of all the "Gods," and the Ganges (river) is the most sacred of all "tīrthas," one can think of the *Gītā* as containing the essence of Hindu wisdom and knowledge. It is said that Lord Krishna (like a sacrificial spoon of ghee offered in a typical fire sacrifice) squeezed this essence and fed it directly into the mouth of Arjuna. It is also said that those who cherish in their hearts the *Gītā*, Ganges, Gāyatrī, and Govinda, all four beginning with the "ga" sound, would become free from the cycle of birth and death.[22]

## Conclusion

In light of Doniger's criticism of the *Gītā,* it would be worthwhile to contrast her statements with those of other western thinkers: Emerson, Thoreau, Einstein, Huxley and others have praised the *Gītā* and quoted from it. Just two examples should suffice: Thoreau, in *Walden,* said "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā,* in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial." And Emerson said, "I owed a magnificent day to the *Bhagavad Gītā.* It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us."

Western academics claim that the *Gītā* is an interpolation in the *Mahābhārata* and is of much later vintage than the venerable epic. For this reason, in Barbara Miller's version[23] of the *Gītā* you will read that the text was composed in the first century C.E. Some therefore argue that the *Gītā* was written to counter the deleterious effects of Buddhism on Hindu society. The pacifism and spread of Buddhism had to be countered, they say, and therefore the clever Brahmins came up with an argument for defending war. If so, and such speculation and hypotheses is put forward in academic institutions, and by the political detractors of Hindus, one can simply point out that the *Gītā* has many uses, and therein lies the profundity of the text. It is a Hindu treatise and like most Hindu treatises it does not segment and divide life into arbitrary portions and aspects but tries to weave together

and "synthesize" life-forces.[24] The "celestial song" is many layered, and one can find meanings in it depending on one's age, understanding, and wisdom. It cannot be pigeon-holed as a "pro-war" or "anti-war" treatise, much as Doniger and Gandhi would like us to believe. Instead, like many other religious texts, the *Gītā* will shake the foundations of the mind to open the "non-rational" side of human life and existence, and lead the devoted "seeker" to realms of imagination, intuition, and the discovery of new worlds.

**Endnotes**

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5."Big-screen caddy is Hindu hero in disguise," David O'Reilly, *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* November 19, 2000.

6. "The *Bhagavad Gītā* according to Gandhi." cited above, p. 16.

7. *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), by Steven Pressfield. Harper Collins.

8. *Gītā On The Green: The Mystical Tradition Behind Bagger Vance,* (2000). Steven Rosen. Continuum International Publishing.

9. As opposed to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* article, the *New York Times* review of the movie includes not one mention of the *Gītā*! So much for the "newspaper of record." "'The Legend of Bagger Vance': Golf Angel to the Rescue," (November 3, 2000), By A. O. Scott.

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13. The Sanskrit word *samskāra* has many meanings, and for an interesting discussion of the word see A.K. Ramanujan's afterword in his translation of U.R. Anantha

Murthy's novel "Samskāra"(1978). University of Oxford Press. In Doniger's usage of the term, it means "the power of memory, faculty of recollection, and the realizing of past perceptions..."

14. See "The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade (Worlds of Desire)", (2000), Wendy Doniger. University of Chicago Press.

15. *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Rāmakrishna* (1998), Jeffrey John Kripal. University of Chicago Press.

16. N. Delmonico (Ed.) (1986). *Gifts of Sacred Wonder,* Calcutta: Subarnarekha, p. xxi-xxii

17. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1958, abridged). Trans., Swami Nikhilananda. New York: Ramakrishna Vedanta Center. "What is the significance of the *Gītā*? It is what you find by repeating the word ten times. It is then reversed into 'Tāgī,' which means a person who has renounced everything for God." (p. 157)

18. I am indebted to Arun Gupta who posted the "Tāgī" version on the Indic Traditions list.

19. See the latest translation of the *Gītā* which has become a best-seller. "*Bhagavad Gītā*: A New Translation," by Stephen Mitchell (Editor) (2000). Harmony Books. There was a minor controversy about this none too fine translation when readers found that the book had been categorized under "fiction."

20. V.V. Raman (2000), "On the many ways of seeing the *Bhagavad Gītā,*" Posted on the Indic Traditions list.

21. Sāṅkhya: A branch of Indian philosophy that teaches self-realization through knowledge of the distinction between spirit and matter.

22. There are many internet sources on the *Gītā*. I would suggest Dr. Krishna Bhatta's commentaries at http://www.ghen.net/forum/postlist.pl?Cat=15,44&Board=krishnabhatta

23. Barbara S. Miller (1986) *The Bhagavad-Gītā: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War.* Bantam New Age Books.

24. "The Hindu mind is essentially synthetic. It always analyses a problem into its various aspects, and considers them in their synthetic relation to one another. It never destroys the organic unity of a subject and makes a compartmental study of its different aspects." J. Sinha, in his preface to the first edition of *Indian Psychology, Volume 1, Cognition* (1958/1996). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.

# VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE AND THE *BHAGAVAD-GITA*

Hector Avalos

The relationship between religion and violence has received new attention in the last couple of decades, particularly as the demise of the bipolar world has led to debate about whether the resurgence in nationalisms are necessarily associated with religious divisions (Huntington; Rashid). At the same time, postcolonial writers such as Edward Said and Richard King have been reassessing the relationships between the west and the "east," as constructed by Europeans and Americans. Such reassessments naturally precipitate the question of how the sacred texts of various religions view violence and its justification.

Recently, Regina Schwartz has argued that monotheism, particularly in the forms expressed in Judaism and Christianity, is inherently violent. Schwartz (5) says that her book "locates the origins of violence in identity formation, arguing that imagining identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary marking and line drawing, is the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit." Further, she locates violence in the concept of scarcity, claiming that religion fosters it in a unique way. Just how religion and scarcity coincide will become clear as this paper continues.

As far as this article is concerned, I am not adopting Schwartz's view of monotheism, nor am I stating that it is correct. I am, however, reporting on her viewpoint and asking my readers to consider what she says with an open mind. I think that the relationship between monotheism and violence does deserve to be explored—and either confirmed or disproved by further dialogue and scholarship. Although Schwartz has concentrated her analysis on Judaism as her paradigm of a monotheistic religion, it would be fair to ask whether other religions could also be subjected to such an analysis. For


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example, how would the *Bhagavad Gītā* (BG), an important Indic text, fare under such a scrutiny in comparison to the Bible? Is Schwartz being unfair to Judaism and Christianity, or is violence inherent in other or all religious traditions, including those which use the BG as a sacred text? Or phrased more bluntly and specifically: Is the Bible more violent than the BG?

At the outset of any comparison between the Bible and the BG, we must note that the definition of the term "Bible" is itself dependent on religious tradition. Thus, for Protestants the word "Bible" means the thirty-nine books they call the Old Testament, and twenty-seven that constitute what they call the New Testament. For Catholics, the Bible has seven more books that are deemed just as inspired as those in the Protestant canon. For Jews, only what Protestants call "the Old Testament" is inspired. For Judaism, the New Testament is the work of a heretical Jewish group who no longer wished to follow God's laws. Our comparison will be based, more for convenience than for any ideological grounds, on the Catholic canon because it includes the largest number of books of western Christian traditions.

At the same time, we are aware of the problems when using the BG as a representative Hindu text (Larson). As Eric Sharpe (13) notes, the BG became a popular Hindu text, at least from a western perspective, in the late nineteenth century and in the aftermath of an imperialistic expansion of Britain into India. We are also painfully aware that S. N. Balagangadhara and other writers would argue that westerners cannot even understand what they have constructed as "Hinduism," much less pontificate on what the BG means. The critical and hermeneutic issues raised by the BG can be as complex as those raised by the Bible. The BG traditionally is seen as part of the *Mahābhārata,* which itself may have been constructed over a period approaching or even exceeding that which produced the amalgamation of books we call "The Bible." There are numerous disputes about the authorship and date of composition of the BG just as there are disputes about dating all or parts of the Bible (Minor, 1982: xxxiii-xlix). And we have not even begun to mention that the variety of intricate interpretational approaches applied to the BG rival those applied to the Bible.

But even with all of these problems, the BG now is claimed as important by people that describe themselves as Hindu as well as by many westerners who study the modality, religion, or group of religions that westerners call Hinduism. It is the most translated text, the Bible excepted (Minor, 1986: 5). While the BG might have become relatively popular in the nineteenth century, it has drawn the interest of many Indian commentators, reaching

at least as far back as Śaṅkara in the seventh-eighth centuries (Minor, 1982:xvi). The BG was certainly an important text of Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), who is acknowledged as the principal hero of Indian independence by many westerners as well as native Indians. Gandhi, like many other interpreters, deems the BG special for its pan-Hindu universality and because it is written in a language accessible to a larger number of people as opposed to some of the more esoteric texts (Jordens, 93). And, as can be seen in the works of Steiner and others, comparisons between the Bible and the *Bhagavad Gītā* already have a long tradition, for better or worse (see further Sharpe, 49). It is in such a light, then, that we can at least explore how a western secular and critical approach might view a comparison of violence in the BG and the Bible.

## The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Violence is a primary fact of life for biblical figures in the Hebrew Bible, and the biblical deity is often portrayed as the prime mover for this violence. Scarce resources play a part in this violence from the very beginning. According to Genesis 2:9, God creates a garden with two trees. One is the tree of knowledge and the other is the tree of life. These scarce resources are then placed off limits to human beings by Yahweh, the biblical god (Genesis 2:17). Human beings soon covet the fruit of these trees, and disobey Yahweh's commands. As a result of this disobedience, human beings are banished from paradise, and a curse is placed on them. One curse includes the violent relationship that will exist between the serpent and the woman in Genesis 3:14-15.

> The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.
>
> I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

Soon thereafter, one sees the first murder recorded in the Bible, the killing of Abel by Cain (Genesis 4). The murder revolved around a perceived inequality in the types of offerings that Abel and Cain had brought to God. Abel had brought the best of his flock, while Cain had brought the fruit of

the ground. Although it is not explicitly stated that Cain's offering was meant to be of lesser quality, there may be a link to the associated story of the cursing of the ground by Yahweh in Genesis 3:17. Thus, anything growing from the ground was unacceptable. In sum, God had punished the world by making food resources unequal in value.

Land becomes another scarce resource that causes conflict. Land conflicts are explicitly attributed to scarcity in the story of the conflict between Abraham and his nephew, Lot (Genesis 13:6-7). Abraham had migrated with some of his family from Mesopotamia to Canaan, but the new homeland could not support all of this family, and so a conflict ensued. The solution was for Lot to go to less hospitable territories to end the conflict.

Additional conflicts about scarce land resources arise from the biblical claim that the land of Israel is given by Yahweh to one people (Genesis 15:17-21), the sons of Jacob, but inhabitants are already there. The solution this time is ethnic cleansing. Yahweh orders the destruction of all the prior inhabitants. Thus, Deuteronomy 7:1-2.

> When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

Such acts are repeated in the course of the Hebrew settlement. In Joshua 6:21, women and children are killed to possess Jericho. In Numbers 31:17, the Israelites are ordered to kill women and boys, but to save young women as slaves. In any event, it is clear that biblical god did not create sufficient habitable land for everyone, and violent conflicts ensued to possess the land that was available.

Access to the divine will is yet another cause for conflict. God does not reveal himself equally to all. This is pointed out in a story about how God reveals himself to Moses in a manner that he does not reveal himself to other human beings, in Numbers 12:6-8.

> And he said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my

> house. With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

This inequality was cause for conflict between Moses and his siblings, Miriam and Aaron. Miriam eventually was punished with a skin disease for questioning Moses' authority.

But perhaps the single most important cause of conflict, according to Schwartz, is monotheism. There is indeed a debate about whether the Hebrews were monotheists (believers in the existence of only one god), or monolatrists (worshippers of one god, while acknowledging the existence of other gods). As is argued by Peter Hayman, it may be more accurate to say that the Hebrews were monolatrists, who worshipped one god, but did not deny the existence of many other supernatural entities that can be called gods.

In any event, the idea that there is one supreme being who favors his worshippers at the expense of the worshippers of other gods brought conflict. Throughout the Bible, there are injunctions not to worship other gods, and such injunctions are enforced by violent means. One particular example is found in the story of Elijah's contests with the prophets of Baal, a deity seen as a rival of Yahweh. Elijah challenges the four-hundred prophets of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel. A sacrificial altar is set up, and Elijah stipulates that the god that answers by fire will be declared the winner. Baal fails to answer, and Yahweh sends fire to ignite the sacrifice on the altar. Accordingly to 1 Kings 18:40: "Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.' Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there."

Of course, Yahweh's own worshippers are the recurrent targets of violence or threats of violence by God. The paradigmatic text is Exodus 20:5-6: "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." Disobedience to this one god can bring everything from total human destruction, as in Noah's Flood (Genesis 6), to the killing of individuals such as Nadab and Abihu, who did not follow the proper sacrificial procedures (Numbers 3:4)

There are at least three related strategies used by Jewish and Christian interpreters to address these violent texts: 1) Justification of the violence; 2)

Discontinuation of the violence; 3) The privileging of one set of texts over another. Thus, Gleason Archer (121), a conservative Christian interpreter, states, concerning some of the episodes of ethnic cleansing:

> Yet there were specific situations when entire communities (such as Jericho) or entire tribes (such as the Amalekites) were to be exterminated by the Israelites in obedience to God's commands. In each case these offenders had gone so far in degeneracy and moral depravity that their continued presence would result in spreading the dreadful cancer of sin among God's covenant people. Just as the wise surgeon removes dangerous cancer from his patient's body by use of the scalpel, so God employed the Israelites to remove such dangerous malignancies from human society.

Archer thus justifies the violence by saying that the native peoples had to be exterminated for the greater good of the Hebrew settlers. Likewise, for traditional Jewish interpreters such as Maimonides, such wars fall under the idea of Holy War, which is permissible to extend God's laws (Fishbane, 26).

But note that allegorization is the one strategy not usually followed by Jewish and Christian interpreters in these texts. There usually is no attempt to say that these texts are really speaking of battles between the soul and body. There is no attempt by traditional Christian interpreters to deny that the violence ever occurred. It is true that secular critical scholars have often denied the historicity of some of these biblical narratives, but they do not deny that the biblical authors believed that such violence occurred or was justified. Allegorical interpretations, when they occur, are seen to be in addition to the literal sense of the text.

Even Anabaptists, Quakers, and other pacifist Christian groups do not deny that such biblical violence occurred or do not allegorize the violence. Rather they might say that the Hebrews were acting under a different covenant that no longer applies to Christians (Bainton, 153; Burns). Such violent tactics, in other words, were discontinued or were restricted to a particular group at a particular time. They are not to be generalized to all of God's people. Alternatively phrased, such pacifists might argue that not all biblical texts should be applied to our current situation, thus privileging one set of texts over another.

Of course, there are many injunctions to love "thy neighbor" in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Leviticus 19:18). However, this is usually interpreted to mean a fellow Hebrew, not foreigners, as is clear from texts commanding

the destruction of native inhabitants. One should also note that some Hebrew authors look forward to a time when peace will reign. Thus, Isaiah 2:4:

> "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

However, such hopes are with the understanding that violence against the enemies of Yahweh will precede such peace. Violence, thus, is a necessary instrument to gain that scarce resource we call peace.

## New Testament

New Testament authors often portrayed their religion as a religion of love, in contrast to the Old Testament. Thus, Jesus himself is credited with introducing a law to love your enemy—one that was to replace a previous law to hate your enemy (Matthew 5:44). And, according to John 13:34, Jesus says: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." However, if one applies Schwartz's perspectives, one can see that the same scarcity of resources that creates violence in what Christians call the Old Testament exists in the New. While many New Testament writers declare the death of the ethnocentricity of the Old Testament (See Galatians 3:28), in essence Christianity is simply exchanging one notion of an in-group for another, thus creating the seeds for violence.

The in-group are fellow Christians. They alone receive salvation. They alone will be granted the scarce resource called "eternal life." This is clear in many texts, including John 14:6: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" Those that do not believe in Christianity, will eventually be destroyed or tortured eternally in hell, as is clear in Matthew 25:40-41:

> And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' He will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'…

Here Jesus uses in-group language ("my family") and out-group language ("you that are accursed"), which, in turn, creates the type of conflict that

Schwartz believes typifies a monotheistic or monolatrous religion such as Christianity. The new in-group, according to some New Testament authors, no longer includes Judaism, the parent religion. Such exclusion often bore the seeds of conflict which then has credited as the prime factor for anti-Judaism in western history (Klein; Sandmel).

Ironically, it is the love that most Christians believe typifies Jesus that becomes the very scarce resource that creates conflict. Jesus indeed commands people to love one another. However, such a love cannot be equal. Love is a scarce resource, and most of it must be reserved for Jesus. In Matthew 10:34-37, Jesus himself acknowledges that this will cause conflict:

> "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

Luke 14:26 is even more emphatic in saying that: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

Here many Christian apologists do attempt to deny the plain sense of Jesus' sayings, as hating one's parents appears inconceivable on the lips of Jesus. Common strategies include making "hate" mean "love more than," as is the case in the parallel text of Matthew 10:37 (So Geisler, 283). But the Greek (*miseo* = hate) is clear. Most translations (e.g., KJV, RSV, NRSV) do in fact translate it as "hate." But apologists do not interpret hate literally. Thus, Luke is not telling you to hate your parents; Luke is telling you to love Jesus more than your parents. But, again, such strategies are not the norm when dealing with most of the violent texts in the Bible.

The single most violent book in the entire Christian canon is probably the book of Revelation, which may be seen as a "revenge novel." The author(s) create every single mode of revenge that they can imagine upon those that are not following Christianity in the manner approved by the author. In one instance (Revelation 9:4-5), creatures are unleashed against those that are in the out-group ("those who do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads"), and they "were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a

scorpion when it stings someone." Thus, here torture, not death, is the explicit immediate purpose of God, according to the author. Eventually, Christ returns to exact vengeance upon all of the enemies of Christianity (Revelation 19-20).

In the case of Revelation, Christians have been divided as to how much is literal and how much is allegorical (Thompson). However, the reason for the allegorization is not ostensibly to eliminate the violence. Rather the reason for the allegorization is to harmonize some of the visions, historical claims, and chronological statements with empirical reality. Indeed, answering the question of when these events are to happen has generated the larger amount of allegorization.

Thus, from a secular critical perspective, the New Testament is even more violent than the Old Testament. In the Old Testament violence upon an individual lasts a finite amount of time—basically the lifetime of an individual. You can kill an individual or a whole group, and that is the final point of any violence. Christianity, however, extends violence into the afterlife. Non-Christians will be tortured in hell forever (Revelation 20:15). Although many Christians believe in hell as symbolic, most traditional Christians have no problem in believing in the eternal torture of non-Christians in some literal fiery lake.

Even when human beings are directed not to commit violence on opponents (e.g., Matthew 5:44, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"), such injunctions are subsidiary to the idea that God will be the one to exact violence in the end. This is clear in Romans 12:19: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Such a seemingly pacifist theology, therefore, is not so much an opposition to violence itself, as it is in opposition to the idea that human beings ought to serve as the proper agents of violence. In any event, the broader view of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament indicates that human beings or God can commit justifiable violence at some point on all of those that do not belong to the respective in-groups.

## The *Bhagavad Gītā*

The basic background story of the BG is relatively well known (see Stoler, 4-5). The king of Hastinapura, a town located about fifty miles north of modern Delhi, had two sons, Dhritarashtra, the eldest, and Pandu. When their

father died, Pandu succeeded to the throne, as Dhritarashtra was blind. Pandu, however, eventually died and his five sons were raised by Dhritarashtra. While Pandu's eldest son, Yudhishthira, has the legitimate right to succession, Duryodhana, the eldest of Dhritarashtra's one hundred sons, attempts to ascend to the throne. After some complicated intrigues, the Pandavas are exiled, but return to claim the throne through the battle at the core of the *Mahābhārata,* of which the BG is a part.

As the BG opens the Pandavas and Kauravas are deployed on the battle-field called Kurukṣetra. Soon we find Arjuna pondering what he should do in light of an impending battle with his kinsmen. Krishna counsels him, and the dialogue forms a meditation, in part, on various aspects of life itself. Insofar as violence is concerned, the central question is perhaps to be found in BG 1:37: "What happiness could we ever enjoy, if we killed our own kinsmen in battle?"

The answer to this question depends on whether we interpret part or all of the BG literally or allegorically. For an exegete like Robert Minor, it is clear that Krishna is counseling Arjuna to do his duty as a warrior (*kṣatriya*). Minor (1982: 2) says: "These allegorical interpretations are not in any sense explicit in the Gītā itself. The writer does not seem to intend an allegory." The same literal interpretation is favored by K. N. Upadhyaya, among other interpreters, cited by Minor.

According to such a literalistic approach, Krishna's answer is clear in BG 2:18: "fight" (*yudhyasva*), and Krishna gives the following reasons in BG 2:33-34: "Now, if you will not undertake this proper engagement thereupon, having avoided your own duty and glory, you shall incur evil (*pāpam avāpsyasi*). And also people will relate your undying infamy; And, for the honored, disgrace is worse than dying." Sri Aurobindo (89) concurs that "non-slaying would be here the sin." Later, in BG 2:38, Krishna is again direct, and commands Arjuna: "Join yourself to battle!"(*yuddhāya yujyasva*). If one were to read it literally and directly, then it would appear to be clear that the BG believes that violence is necessary, at least in some instances.

If we were to apply Schwartz's idea of scarce resources as the cause of conflict, then our analysis would also be quite simple. The scarce resource is power, especially as manifested by the institution of kingship. Only one person can be king, and that is the scarce resource that is being contested. Since Krishna seems to advocate the fight for this goal, then he is advocating the use of violence to secure a scarce resource. The creator of the universe is responsible for creating such scarce resources, and, therefore, for

any violence that ensues.

At the same time, from a secular critical perspective, there are subsidiary seeds for violence in the BG. The idea that one's life continues beyond the earthly one can be used as a justification for violence. If the body does not matter, then any violence done to the body ought not matter either. This is most apparent in Krishna's arguments in BG 2:26-30. Thus, in BG 2:27: "For the born, death is certain, for the dead there is certainly birth. Therefore, for this, inevitable in consequence, you should not mourn (*śocitumarhasi*)." Likewise, there is BG 18:17, which says: "He whose state of mind is not egoistic, whose intelligence is not befouled, even though he slays these people, does not slay and is not bound (by his actions)." As noted by Sharpe (83-84), such passages were used to support violent means to overthrow British imperialism. O'Connell (44) also acknowledges that other interpretive traditions of the BG agree that "violence in some cases or at some times has been obligatory" even if at a perfunctory level.

From a secular critical viewpoint, BG 18:41-44, among other passages, also condones and promotes the caste system, which may be seen as a hierarchy of in-groups and out-groups. Thus, in BG 18:44: "Service is the inborn nature of the Sūdra." From a Schwartzian perspective, such hierarchies can develop as a response to scarce resources, where one group wishes to monopolize or have privileged access to those resources. We might argue that labor is the scarce commodity that is being sought. The Śūdras, because of their skin color or other reasons, might then become a target for the extraction of labor. Such inequalities are inherently prone to violence as either the high status group attempts to enforce its will on the lower caste or the lower caste revolts.

But the literalistic interpretation that appears to sanction violence and social inequalities has yielded, particularly in the last one hundred years, to allegorical interpretations that deny that the BG has any reference to a real war or sanctions real social inequities. Such an allegorical interpretation is favored by, among others, Mahatma Gandhi. Allegorical interpreters would argue that such an approach is already suggested by the very first verse of the BG: "On the field of Dharma (*dharmakṣetre*), in the field of Kuru. Assembled together, desiring to fight. What did my army and that of the Sons of Pandu do, Samjaya?" Since Dharma is not necessarily a physical place, then the "field of Dharma" can be seen to be a metaphor, which one can easily extend to the whole BG in a thoroughly allegorical manner.

According to allegorical interpreters, the text makes clear that Dharma,

which is itself a difficult term to translate, is the theme of the story. Dharma need have nothing to do with war or violence in a physical sense. The battle can be interpreted to be between different aspects of the self. Thus Gandhi (Strohmeier, 2000: 16) says:

> Even in 1888-89, when I first became acquainted with the Gita, I felt that it was not a historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring.

Gandhi (Strohmeier, 27) later adds: "It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil, which become personified in us as virtues and vices. The Kauravas represent the forces of Evil, and the Pandavas the forces of Good." Likewise, Gandhi eliminates a violent interpretation of BG 18:17 by claiming that the slaying mentioned there is permissible only for God, not man (Strohmeier, 219-220).

Of course, even other Indian interpreters have not left Gandhi's exegesis of BG 18:17 and other passages unchallenged. G. W. Kaveeshwar (250, n. 1), says: "Gandhi too gives a laboured interpretation…Instead of accepting that this verse cannot be reconciled with the view of extreme non-violence, he says that like the geometrical line the Gita has here described an imaginary ideal applicable only to God, and that is not for man to attempt to follow it. As a matter of fact, there is little superhuman in this verse, its central idea being that there is nothing wrong in fighting with a non-egoistic and egoless attitude a righteous war inevitable in the pursuit of duty." Similarly, Berg (33), a western interpreter, criticizes Gandhi and other allegorizers for, among other things, "confusing the literal meaning of a text with its historical references or lack therof."

To complicate matters, and as noted by Minor (1982: 56), the practice of "skill-in-means" (*upaya-kausilya*), could been invoked to deny the literalness of the text. Under such an approach, "the teacher begins where the pupil is, and then guides him to higher truth which might even negate his earlier arguments."

Thus, Krishna need not really mean to encourage literal violence upon other human beings. Krishna may simply wish to teach a lesson that cannot be easily perceived by the unenlightened.

Of course, Gandhi and other pacifists also point to the praising of *ahiṁsā*

(non-violence) to show that the BG favors a non-violent way of life. Thus, in BG 16:2-3 *ahiṁsā* is mentioned alongside many other laudable attributes of "those born to the divine destiny" (*daivim abhijatasya*). The idea of *ahiṁsā,* then, becomes, for Gandhi, one of the keys to interpreting the entire BG. Indeed, as far as life is concerned, "*Ahiṁsā* is a comprehensive principle (Gandhi, 1929: 228). On the other side, Winthrop Sargeant (17) regards the concept of *ahiṁsā* as follows: "But the advocacy of *ahiṁsā*, or non-violence, in the Gita, a work which might in some ways be described as a call to battle, is one of its principal contradictions."

Likewise, the caste system can interpreted allegorically or as non-essential, and even contrary, to the BG and Hinduism itself. Thus, K. N Sen (27), says: "Indeed the caste divisions, as they exist today, are very much against the basic Hindu doctrine of the all-pervading Brahman, identified with the Ātman." The logic apparently is that, if everyone is part of Brahman, then everyone should be equal.

So is a literal or an allegorical reading of the BG the correct one? Actually, what confronts us is a classic hermeneutic impasse that occurs also in biblical interpretation. What the interpreters of both the BG and the Bible are essentially doing is attempting to read the mind of the author(s), who are perceived to be divine and/or human. But no interpreter can really prove that something is meant to be literal or not. The BG certainly can be seen to advocate violence and other inequalities that create violence, if interpreted literally. The BG can be understood to advocate non-violence if understood that any encouragement to battle really refers to a struggle between lower and the higher self or some other non-physical struggle. And there are many variations on both positions.

## Conclusion

So is the Bible more violent than the BG? The answer is as relativistic as the types of viewpoints we have examined. If interpreted literally, at least some portions of the Bible are quite explicit in advocating violence as the proper means to settle conflicts that ultimately derive from unequal access to scarce resources, including land, God's revelation, and human authority. Such directives reach back to God himself. If interpreted literally, the BG can also be seen as supporting violence. Krishna directs Arjuna to participate in war. Krishna supports the caste system that in itself may be a sort of violence to those that are in the lower echelons. Krishna devalues bodily

suffering and death, which can logically lead to devaluing violence as well.

If we extend the logic of Schwartz, it might be that all religions, not just monotheistic ones, are ultimately violent. All religions ultimately depend on creating, rather than just addressing, scarce resources. And more importantly, the scarce resources created by religion are generally accepted as unverifiable, which itself leads to violence. That is to say, since no one can externally verify that transcendent forces exist, and since no one can conclusively verify that any particular god wills one thing rather than another, religion creates conflicts that might be seen as unnecessary. Access to the divine will itself become the scarce resource that either creates divisions, or exacerbates pre-existing in-group and out-group divisions. People will fight about which version of a god's will is really the true one, when, from a secular critical viewpoint, the whole notion of a divine will is a mere projection for the believers' own wishes and wants.

But still there are differences regarding violence in the Bible and the BG. One difference is the sheer number of episodes of violence in the Bible as compared to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. There is scarcely a book in the Bible in which violence is not either sanctioned, condoned, or just reported without value judgment. The number of passages advocating peace or love are really a minority. Yet, such a comparison may be unfair to the Bible for the principal reason that the length of the works is not the same. The BG is smaller, and so might have fewer episodes of violence. A better comparison might be the Bible with the *Mahābhārata,* but then there is a disparity in size there as well that may not be fair to the *Mahābhārata.*

But if size and quantity of violent language is not comparable, we can definitely say that the difference between the Bible and the BG resides in the history of interpretation of passages relating to violence. It is true that the acceptance of literal interpretations of violence and the caste system in the BG have a far longer history than allegorical ones, and even the literal ones have various approaches when dealing with the violence of the text. Nonetheless, the followers of the Bible historically have not usually interpreted in allegorical terms the texts commanding violence or condoning violence. Rather, the prominent strategy in Jewish and Christian interpretation has been to justify the violence rather than to allegorize it. Like Gleason Archer, for example, such interpreters would say that the circumstances for violence were extraordinary or that God had a goal in mind that we must respect. If there are allegorical interpretations, they are in addition to the literal one, not substitutes.

The same is definitely not the case with the BG. The pacifist interpretations have been just as prominent as the literal ones, especially since Gandhi's time. And many traditionalists are ready to accept the allegorical dimension that lay at the basis of these pacifistic interpretations. Such allegorical readings are, in a sense, more consistent and thorough than the literal, at least regarding violence. Moreover, there at least seems to be willingness on the part of modern readers of the BG to accept such allegorical interpretations. And this can be extended to the larger epics, and so it is not quantity of violent episodes and passages that is really at issue. Rather it is a difference in the preference for allegory versus literalism on the part of the interpreters of the BG. In addition, the violence in the BG and the *Mahābhārata* always seems to be a last resort and part of an agonizing decision as opposed to the Bible, where violence, with few exceptions (e.g., Judges 21:3-7) seems to flow without much deliberation. This is an important point. A close look at the *Mahābhārata* reveals that violence is engaged after much consideration and regret by the Pandava heroes. Thus, even a literal reading reveals that violence is not preferred according to the teachings and background of the BG.

In conclusion, the comparison we have undertaken really has served as a plea to shift our attention to the history of interpretation. If we are really interested in comparing violence, whether in a Schwartzian perspective or otherwise, then we should begin to ask why it is that the Judeo-Christian interpretive tradition has not allegorized passages that ostensibly encourage, condone, or command violence. Why have most Bible-based traditions not seen those texts as metaphors for inner struggles? Why not allegorize them as fights between lower and higher selves, as is often done with the BG? The better question is why the Judeo-Christian tradition has primarily developed a hermeneutic for the justification of violence rather than the allegorization of violence. In sum, we should ask why allegorical interpretations of violence are such a scarce resource in Judaism and Christianity as compared to the allegorical interpretations, even if relatively recent, applied to the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

**A note on translations***

*Translations of the BG are my own adaptations of those in Winthrop Sargeant. Unless noted otherwise, all biblical citations are those of the *New Revised Standard Version*. National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989.

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# AHIṀSĀ IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA: A STORY, A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE, AND AN ADMONISHMENT

Christopher Key Chapple

*Ahiṁsā* or nonviolence might seem an unlikely topic for one of the world's greatest war epics. Any student of Indian philosophy or religion undoubtedly associates the *Mahābhārata* with Lord Krishna urging Arjuna to take up his weapons and fight and the bloodbath that follows. And despite the attempts of Gandhi and many others to make the struggle between the Pāṇḍava brothers and the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra metaphorical, no one can deny the reality of carnal savagery in the text, even on the part of the "good guys."

While on the one hand advocating strong action appropriate to one's station in life, the *Mahābhārata* also harbors myriad complementary views, acknowledging the significant contributions of numerous "minority" positions and practices. Bhīṣma, the paragon of knowledge and the grand-uncle of the text's protagonists, gives forth a wellspring of information about dharma on his deathbed of arrows. Within these discourses, several references are made to nonviolence or harmlessness (*ahiṁsā*) that underscore its emerging importance as the prevailing virtue to be observed by Brahmans and renouncers.

In the essay that follows, I will investigate three such instances within the Sānti Parvan and the Anuśāsana Parvan. The first takes the form of a story that I will summarize. It includes reference to the tension between showy asceticism and a more measured form of spirituality. It includes extensive descriptions of how animals are maltreated, and develops a rhetorical argument and appeal for observing nonviolent principles. The second example is a very gracefully crafted summation of monistic philosophy through


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which one is encourged, by dint of seeing other as self, to treat the other as if it were one's own self, and hence adopt nonviolent behavior. The third example advocates vegetarianism as the most obvious and appropriate modality for practicing nonviolence.

## A Nonviolent Tale

In response to a question by Yudhiṣṭhira regarding the nature of righteousness and dharma, Bhīṣma tells the tale of an encounter between a Brahman ascetic named Jājali and a man named Tulādhara, a merchant (and perhaps a Jaina). Jājali had devoted years of his life to the most austere of penances: complicated fasts, protracted periods of silence, and such utter disregard for his body that he no longer bathed and his hair became matted. During one particularly stringent phase in the forest he abstained from all food and while sustaining himself on air alone, he remained in a standing position, like a post, with no movement whatsoever. A pair of Kulinga birds nested in his locks. Months passed. The birds mated, and from the eggs on Jājali's head, young birds hatched and were nutured by their parents. Even after the birds had learned to fly, Jājali stood stationary. But finally, after they had fully matured and abandoned their safe haven on his head, Jājali allowed himself to rejoice, and proclaimed that he had won great merit by his noble deed, and that no one was his equal. The gods, however, heard his boast, and a voice from the sky told him that his virtue and merit were surpassed by Tulādhara, a shopkeeper in the city of Banaras. Jājali then went in search of this wise man and found him at his haberdashery. Tulādhara greeted Jājali knowingly, and told him that he knew of his austerities and that he knew about the birds that had been born on his head. He also chided the Brahman for his pride, and asked how he might be of service to him.

Jājali, in the style of the Upaniṣads, asked Tulādhara to tell him of correct morality and the ways of knowledge. Jājali's response, in praise of nonviolence, covers a wide range of issues. He replies that "harmlessness towards all creatures" is the highest morality. Because of his commitment to this lifestyle, he says he never cheats anyone, never quarrels or hold grudges. Reminiscent of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he proclaims "My scales are perfectly even, O Jājali, with respect to all creature…I cast equal eye upon all creatures…I see no difference beteen a clod of earth, a piece of stone, and a lump of gold" (Ganguli: IX, CCLXII, 234). He claims that by following this

vow, he has no fear of creatures, nor do creatures fear him. He claims that speaking truth and by practicing the dharma of nonviolence, one enjoys even greater fruit than that gained by sacrifices or penances. He criticizes those that castrate bulls and pierce their noses and force them to serve as beasts of burden. He claims that "in every creature that is endued with the five senses live all the deities…The goat is Agni. The sheep is Varuna. The horse is Surya. Earth is the deity Virat. The cow and the calf are Soma. The man who sells these can never obtain success" (Ganguli: IX, CCLXII, 236). He equates acts of injury done to animals to abortion, and notes that Nahuṣa, who had both killed a bull and caused a foetus to abort, thereby brought diseases to creatures and was barred from religious rites. He even condemns agriculture as harmful to creatures and the earth.

Jājali protests that Tulādhara's teachings run counter to the natural order of things, and that they seem quite heretical. Without the support of food, he states, the world will come to an end. In response, Tulādhara states that nature provides abundantly. Appealing to a Golden Age of long ago, Tulādhara tells of days when crops sprouted forth from the earth without cultivation. He assails the greed that has overtaken people and forced the proliferation of needless and harmful rituals and sacrifices. He condemns covetous priests who assist at ceremonies for the "misguided" and have as their end material gain rather than liberation. He urges using rice balls to replace animals at Vedic sacrifices. He also tells Jājali to give up his wanderings, to recognize that "the Soul is itself a Tīrtha (sacred place)." Tulādhara then looks up into the sky and tells Jājali that the birds that currently circle overhead are the very ones that he reared on his head far from this place. Jājali calls to them, and, at the close of the tale, the birds affirm Tulādhara's teaching of nonviolence as the true path of liberation.

This story of Jājali and Tulādhara, because of Tulādhara's profession as a merchant in nonviolent goods and his description of the uniqueness of each living being, strikes one as theologically inspired by Jainism, which stems from India's early renouncer traditions. This is further supported by Tulādhara's critique of farming and his insistence that animal sacrifice must be abandoned. Though Dumont has posited that the practice of nonviolence and its attendant vegetarianism was introduced into Hindu society from Buddhist and Jaina renouncers (Dumont: 149), this passage emphasizes the observance of nonviolence by laypersons, and highlights a key theme of the *Mahābhārata*: the integration of highest spiritual values into daily life.

## Nonviolence as Unific Perception

The philosophy of harmlessness finds another form of expression later in the *Mahābhārata.* In chapter 113 of the Anuśāsanaparvan, Yudhiṣṭhira queries the god Bṛhaspati, who happens to pass by Bhīṣma's bed of arrows. He asks the teacher of the gods which is best: nonviolence, Vedic observance, meditation, retraint of the senses, austerity, or service to the guru? Bṛhaspati's reply, in keeping with Brahmanical monistic teachings in the Upaniṣads and *Bhagavad Gītā,* emphasizes seeing all things as oneself. It combines notions of self control, nonviolence, oneness, and yogic s*amādhi* into a unified practice and ideology. The chapter in its entirety follows:

1. Yudhiṣṭhira said:
Nonviolence, Vedic dharma, meditation,
control of the senses, austerity, or service to the guru—
which of these is best for a person?
2. Bṛhaspati said:
All these in all ways are distinct doors of dharma.
Listen indeed, O Chief of the Bharatas,
as the six are praised.
3. Listen! I will speak of the unsurpassed,
the most excellent thing for a human:
the refuge of nonviolence,
the dharma that truly causes one to succeed.
4. The person who has always reflected
on the three faults inherent in all beings
and has controlled lust and anger attains success.
5. The one who abstains from using a stick
to kill helpless animals,
desiring the pleasure of the self, attains happiness.
6. That person who sees being as like his own self,
who casts aside the stick and whose anger is conquered,
prospers happily in the life to come.
7. Even the gods are bewildered at the path
of the one who seeks transcendence,
who regards all beings as similar to oneself.
8. It is best not to regard the other
as opposite from oneself.

The other stands in opposition due to desire.
This is the essence of dharma.
9. The person who sees all things as the self whether
in rejecting or giving, in pleasure or pain,
in the pleasant or the unpleasant, goes to samādhi.
10. When a person moves with others,
a commonality is experienced.
Let them imitate this in the world of living beings;
by this skill, all dharma is taught.
11. Vaiśampāyana said:
Having spoken to the dharma King Yudhiṣṭhira,
the preceptor of the gods ascended to heaven
before our eyes.

This application of nonviolence, in addition to advocating abstention from hurting animals, emphasizes the adoption of a philosophical approach that sees all beings as not different from oneself, not unlike the Golden Rule's suggestion to treat others *as if* they were you. This text proclaims that another person is similar to oneself, and must be treated accordingly.

## Advocacy of Vegetarianism in the *Mahābhārata*

Having listened to Bṛhaspati's teaching on nonviolence, which uses terminology familiar within an Upaniṣadic and Brahmanical milieu, Bhīṣma then proceeds to advocate various degrees of vegetarianism. As we will see in the next two chapters of the Anuśāsanaparvan, Bhīṣma condemns eating meat, saying that it is like eating the flesh of one's own son. Yudhiṣṭhira raises the objection that the rules of funeral ceremonies mandate the eating of meat. In reply, Bhīṣma appeals to Manu, who states that the vegetarian is the "friend of all living beings." He also cites the sages Nārada and Bṛhaspati, noting that both praised restraint from eating meat. After giving numerous other reasons for vegetarianism, Yudhiṣṭhira then acknowledges that Manu did assent to the use of meat for ancestral ceremonies. However, he indicates that this is exceptional and not normative. Bhīṣma also suggests abstaining from flesh foods for fixed periods, particularly when the moon is waxing in the month spanning September and October. He notes numerous warriors from the *Mahābhārata* who refrained from eating meat during this period, and rather like a contemporary beer commercial,

claims that this accomplishment caused them to be "encircled with beautiful women!" In conclusion, Bhīṣma notes that vegetarianism spares one from rebirth as an animal, and states that it should be practiced by both renouncers and those active in the world. My translation of these chapters follows:

XIII.115.1. Vaiśampāyana said:

Then King Yudhiṣṭhira, again with great ardor,
said these excellent words
to the grandsire on the bed of arrows:
2. O great minded one,
the seers, the Brahmans, and the gods
praise the dharma known as nonviolence as being in accord
with the peerless authority of the Vedas.
3. By action, by speech, and even by thought
a man does violence, O Prince.
How then does he free himself from sorrow?
4. Bhīṣma said:
According to the Brahman spokesmen,
there are four specific nonviolence prescriptions.
If one of these is neglected,
there is none, O Destroyer of Foes.
[These four are not to commit violence oneself,
or to take what has been yielded by violence,
or pay someone to commit violence,
or to approve any violent act. See XIII:116:4.]
5. As all four legged animals
cannot stand with three legs,
so this indeed, O King,
is declared (inoperable) with three elements only.
[In other words, even if one abstains from three forms of violence and practices only one, one is still deemed violent.]
6. Just as the tracks of a snake
and the footprints of other animals
are all covered over in the footprints of an elephant,
so in all worlds nonviolence
is proclaimed to be the highest dharma.

7. Indeed, by action, by speech, and by thought
(marked by violence), a living being can be tainted.
8. Of old it is heard that renunciation (of violence)
in thought, speech, and action, is the threefold advice
of the Brahmans.
9. Faults indeed are found in those
who have nonviolent thoughts and words but still taste meat;
the sagely ones, yoked with austerity,
do not ever taste meat.
10. Hear me, O King, as I tell the faults of such eating.
The foolish one destroys life,
though it is like the flesh of one's own son.
11. Offspring are born
from the union of a mother and father.
Taste is born from the sensation of the tongue.
Hence, according to Śāstra, attraction should be held back
(so as not to lead to) savoring (meat).
12. Uncooked or cooked, salty or without salt,
when meats are found to be attractive,
then the mind becomes lost.
13. How indeed can lethargic, meat-eating men,
on their way to destruction,
hear the noise of the drum and conch,
the sound of the lyre's string?
[Meat eating renders one insensitive.]
14. Desirous of fruit, defeated by their eager longing,
they praise the taste (of meat)
as inconceivable, indescribable, and unimaginable;
these praisers of meat manifest the fruits of faulty karma.
15. In days gone by,
many noble men have renounced their lives,
have preserved the flesh of another with their own flesh.
16. Thus, Great King, nonviolence is accomplished
through four actions.
Nonviolence is explained to you
in accord with the purpose of all dharma.

XIII:116:1. Yudhiṣṭhira said:
"Nonviolence is the highest dharma:"

This has been said by you many times.
But also you have said that in funeral ceremonies
one desires food offerings for the ancestors.
2. You previously stated that the rules of funerals
dictate the use of meat. From where does this meat come?
Is not something hurt? This is inconsistent.
3. Our people doubt that dharma
is found in abstaining from meat.
What would be the fault of such eating?
What would be the virtue of not eating it?
4. What of the man who killed for food,
or (took something) killed by another,
or was killed for the sake of another
or bought it in order to eat?
5. I wish that this be thoroughly explained by you;
with certainty I want to perform this eternal dharma.
6. How does one attain long life?
How is one made strong?
How does one attain faultless limbs?
How is auspiciousness brought forth?
7. Bhīṣma said:
The eating of meat, O King, is against dharma,
O Chief of the Kurus.
Thus listen to me about the essence
of what one is enjoined to do.
8. Beauty, perfection of limbs, long life,
intelligence, lightness, accomplishment, memory:
nonviolence should be performed by those
self-disciplined men who desire such attainments.
9. There are many discourses on this topic
by the seers, O Chief of the Kurus.
Listen to what has been taught by them, Yudhiṣṭhira.
10. The one who, restrained by vows,
performs the horse sacrifice each month,
is equal to the one who shuns meat and honey, Yudhiṣṭhira.
(To eat honey was considered an act of violence because of the numerous microscopic creatures thought to reside therein.)

11. The Seven Seers, the Bālakhilyas,
and the Marīcipas who have great wisdom
all praise abstention from eat, O King.
12. The sage Manu has said
that the one who does not eat meat
and does not kill nor cause killing,
is the friend of all living beings.
13. The one who refuses meat
is not overpowered by any beings and
is trusted by all that are born;
such a one should be eternally esteemed by Sādhus.
14. Nārada, the restrained one whose self is dharma,
has said that whoever wishes to increase his flesh
with the flesh of another falls into ruin.
15. Bṛhaspati declared that the one
who restrains from meat and honey is distinguished
through austerity, giving, and sacrifice.
16. In my thinking, the one who performs
the horse sacrifice every month for a hundred months
is equal to the one who gives up meat and honey.
17. The one whose refuses meat and honey
is always regarded as a great doer of austerity,
always giving gifts, always sacrificing.
18. Having once eaten meat and then renouncing it
is better than all knowledge and all sacrifice, O Bharata.
19. It is known indeed that to refuse meat is difficult.
To hold this vow, by which all beings are made fearless,
is excellent.
20. That wise person who bestows
the gift of fearlessness on all creatures
is known in the world without doubt
as the giver of life.
21. The wise ones, who regard
the life of beings as their own breath,
praise this highest dharma.
22. In regard to the future, all selves are equal;
all have fear of death.
Through this insight of the great souls, it is said

that even the wise desire existence.
[See *Yoga Sūtra* II:9: Even the wise cling to life.]
23. What indeed can be the worth of a life
that carries on with the sin of subsisting on flesh,
killing those that are healthy and free of fault.
24. Therefore, O King, be enjoined to refuse meat;
this is the ancient high dharma
that brings heaven and happiness.
25. Nonviolence is the highest dharma,
nonviolence is the highest austerity,
nonviolence is the highest truth;
by this, dharma is done.
26. Meat is not born of grass, wood, or rock.
Meat arises from killing a living being.
Thus, in the enjoyment of meat there is fault.
27. The beloved, sincere, truthful gods
have in hand (for nourishment)
oblations, sacrificial offerings, and nectar.
(By contrast), consider the tortuous,
unrighteous ways of flesh eating demons.
28. O King, in not eating meat
one goes without fear in moonlight
or in the dreadful, dangerous darkness
or in the twilight approach of night,
or in the crossroads or in assembles of people.
29. If there were no meateaters,
there would be no killers.
A meat eating man is a killer indeed,
causing death for the purpose of food.
30. If meat were considered not to be food,
there would be no violence.
Violence is done to animals
for the sake of the meat eater only.
31. Because the life of violent ones
is shortened as well (due to their deeds),
the one who wishes long life for himself
should refuse meat, O splendid one.
32. Those fierce ones who do violence to life

are not able to go for protection (when they need it).
The are to be feared by beings as beasts of prey.
33. From greed, or a deluded mind,
or for the sake of strength and vigor,
or from association with the sinful,
the opposite of dharma appeals to people.
34. The one who desires to increase
his flesh with the flesh of another
lives in entrenched anxiety
and is born here and there.
35. Those great vow-keeping seers have said
that those who do not eat meat are great,
are progressing to heaven,
and are bringing good fortune, renown, and long life.
36. This speech of Mārkaṇḍeya on the faults of eating meat,
O Son of Kuntī, was heard formerly by me:
37. "He who eats the flesh of living beings
who wanted to live but have been killed or have died,
that person himself indeed kills.
38. Purchasing, killing, eating are
the three means of obtainment.
The killer, with slaughter or snare,
has three means of destruction.
39. He who never eats meat but assents to it
is considered as having killed and is stained with fault.
40. By not eating meat
and extending compassion to living beings
one is not assailed by any being
and attains long life and happiness.
41. It is said that the dharma of not eating meat
is always more distinguished
than gifts of gold, cattle, or land.
42. One should not eat unauthorized meat
carelessly at random.
Eating thus, a man goes to hell without doubt.
43. The notion that meat consecrated
at the pleasure of Brahman
will incur little fault is false indeed.

44. The one who kills beings
for the sake of food is the lowest sort of person,
a maker of great sin.
The eater is not (as bad as) the killer.
45. That ignorant man who by the ways
of performing prescribed rites and sacrifices
kill animals eagerly longing for their flesh
would indeed go to hell.
46. There is much good dharma for the one who,
having eaten flesh, holds back and abstains from this sin.
47. The ones who procure (meat) or approve of such action,
or who cut it up or cook or eat it or
any combination of these three are killers."
[End of Mārkaṇḍeya speech.]
48. I will now speak about another authoritative position,
fashioned by the honored ones,
established by the ancient seers in the beloved Vedas.
49. It is said, O most excellent of kings,
that dharma marked with activity and
overrun with concern for fruits
does not have liberation as its purpose.
50. Manu said that (meat) can be made pure through mantras
and oblations and consecration with water
according to the Vedic authority of ancestral ceremonies;
any other meat should not be eaten at pleasure.
51. According to injunctions of old, O King,
men are not to eat such meat.
Like demons, O Chief of the Bharatas,
they surely go to hell and infamy.
52. The man who wants to be
free from affliction in his self of self
should always shun the flesh of animals.
53. It is said that long ago
worshippers headed for the world of merit
by men's sacrifices of animals made of rice.
54. Long ago, the doubting seers
asked Vasu, the King of the Cedis (if he ate meat).
He said, "I don't eat meat."

But, O Lord, he did.
55. Having said that, the prince of earth fell
from heaven to the ground.
Having said it again,
he entered the surface of the earth.
56. The high souled Agastya,
through his desire to benefit human beings,
consecrated as deities all the deer of the forest
with his austerity.
57. For the one who has renounced meat,
there is no advantage in resorting to the ancestors or gods;
the ancestors are pleased indeed
by the appropriate attitude regarding the pleasures of meat.
58. O King, listen as I recite this, O Faultless One:
Not eating flesh always brings happiness, O Sovereign of Men.
59. The one who would undergo
dreadful austerity for a full hundred years
and the one who would shun flesh
in my opinion are the same.
60. In the September/October month,
particularly during the fifteen days
of the moon's increase, O Light of Men,
one should shun all meat.
Thus dharma is bestowed here.
61. One who shuns meat
for the four months of the rainy season
obtains the four blessings
of fame, long life, mastery, and strength.
62. Or if one does not eat any meat
for just one month,
having crossed over all sorrows,
he would live in great pleasure.
63. There are those who abstain
from meat monthly or even half-monthly;
for those who have turned from violence,
the world of Brahman is revealed.
64. O Pārtha, those kings who abstain
from meat during the September/October month or half of it

see all beings as their own selves,
which is the traditional aim of knowledge.
65. Nābhāga, Ambariṣa, Great Souled Gaya,
Ayu, Anaraṇya, Dilīpa, Raghu, and Pūru,
66. Kārtavīrya, Aniruddha, Nahuṣa, Yayāti,
Nṛga, Vivagaśva, Saśabindu,
Yuvanāśva, and Sibi the son of Uśī,
67. Syenacirta, Somaka, Vṛka,
Raivata, Rantideva, Vasu, Sṛrñjaya, and
68. Duḥṣmanta, Karuṣa, Rāma,
Alarka, Nala, Virūpāśva,
Nimi, and Janaka the Wise,
69. Sila, Pṛthu, Virasena, Ikṣvāku,
Saṁbhu, Sveta, and Sagara,
70. as well as others, O King,
did not eat meat
during the month of September/October
and thereby attained heaven.
71. Surrounded with wealth,
they stand in the world of Brahmā,
adored by the Gandharvas
and encircled with beautiful women.
72. This nonviolence indeed is the highest dharma,
marked with purity.
Those great souled ones who follow this
dwell in the highest region.
73. Those who eternally abstain from meat and honey
are deemed bearers of dharma.
From birth onwards, these are happily
remembered as sages.
There is no doubt they attain distinction among kin.
74. Such a one is free from the afflictions of wild beasts,
free from the bondage of fetters,
free indeed quickly from the sorrow of disease,
free from unhappiness.
75. Such a man would not be born as an animal.
He would be handsome and intelligent indeed,
O Best of Kurus, and would obtain great fame.

76. This, O King, has been told to you
regarding abstinence from meat,
along with rules fashioned by seers
regarding both action in the world and renunciation.

As evident from the wide range of materials included in these chapters, Bhīṣma regards the practice of vegetarianism to be a longstanding component of Vedic religion. Not only are the names of the Seven Seers, Mārkaṇḍeya, Nārada, and others invoked in the name of forsaking flesh foods, Bhīṣma even contradicts the great lawgiver Manu. However, he does retain a degree of flexibilty, assenting to the notion that even relatively short periods of vegetarianism produce great merit.

In conclusion, these three *Mahābhārata* texts on nonviolence perhaps indicate a Jaina influence, present a Vedāntic rationalization, and advance an enthusiastic embrace of vegetarianism within certain parameters. These passages indicate a respect for aspects of Jainism that accord well with the this-worldly message of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Specifically, the story of Jājali and Tulādhara, advocates a strong yet spiritually disciplined laity. Within this cohort, renouncer values become integrated into everyday life as indicated by Tulādhara's insistence on nonviolence (*ahiṁsā*) and truthfulness (*satya*) in all aspects of his personal life and profession.

Bṛhaspati advocates a philosophical re-configuring of nonviolence. Rather than rooting nonviolence in the pluralistic Jaina theology of countless souls, each of which must be respected in order for one to progress spiritually, he teaches a more mainstream Brahmanical interpretation of nonviolence based on the perceived oneness of all beings. This move perhaps indicates that in accepting the nonviolence ideal, some modifications in terms of justification were needed.

And finally, in his admonishments to Yudhiṣṭhira that vegetarianism ought to be observed, Bhīṣma modifies certain requirements, allowing for varying degrees of stringency. Perhaps this indicates a certain political savvy on his part. By accommodating exceptions and limitations, the idea of giving up meat might be made more palatable to a member of the warrior caste. This also indicates the dynamism of the Hindu tradition, which has consistently exhibited a capacity to change and adapt to new cultural forms and the teachings of new gurus. In a certain sense, this modification of vegetariansim is not unlike compromises made in the development of early Christianity, such as when Paul proposed a

new orthopractic code that deemphasized food laws and circumcision to encourage Gentile conversions.

It is perhaps helpful to recognize that nonviolence as conceived and actualized in this context differs significantly from its political applications as preached and enacted by Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These latter interpretations seek to cultivate nonviolent attitudes not only for self-edification but also for purposes of social uplift. By contrast, the form of nonviolence advocated in the *Mahābhārata* does not lead to a state of pacifism or social activism, but remains concerned primarily with ritual purity. This is not to pass judgment or diminish its signficance: matters of diet and other such concerns with orthopraxy are inherently inward-looking. However, it is important not to divorce practices that cultivate spiritual grounding from a concern with societal issues. Though I know of no such formal studies, it might be the case that a land of observant vegetarians would be quite peaceful, as such persons would be not be likely to promote violent behavior.

The *Mahābhārata* takes as one of its central themes the integration of highest dharma into the daily life of the layperson. This theme extends into the Vaiṣṇava tradition, which actively supports vegetarianism and the adoption of other nonviolent behaviors. The *Mahābhārata* provides textual sanction for the practice of nonviolence, rooted in the teaching that life is sacred in its distinct forms, and unified when seen as part of the spiritual essence that in Vedānta and Vaiṣṇavism is said to pervade all reality.

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# The Use and Abuse of Holy War Imagery: Reflections on Karma Yoga and Jihād

William Jackson

Revered scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Qur'ān* invite listeners into their spheres of religious vision; they direct and inspire those who hear or read them to live in the light of their teachings. Scriptures are often in poetic forms capable of affecting the whole person, and they consist of hauntingly deep images, ambiguous archetypes—that is their very nature. Deep images resonate with the unconscious, from which they are inseparable. The unconscious is a hidden but accessible realm of potential images, emotions, and memories; responding to even small stimuli the unconscious ripples with fantasies about the objects of fear and desire.[1] The unconscious naturally facilitates projections of intense feelings and imaginative activity into scriptural words and world events. The unconscious carries residues of experience,[2] presuppositions, tendencies and inclinations in the deeper levels of our personalities. Our conscious minds sometimes twist and tweak logic to find what our unconscious strongly urges us to see, to fantasize our unconscious ideas into reality. Exploring this process can help explain how irrational acts, fanaticism, and other eruptions occur in response to cultural conditioning and conditions in the world around us. It also helps us realize how scripture can function as deep background of people's and societies' lives. It is a truism that sacred texts at their best inspire constructive, compassionate responses; at their worst, they may be used to justify harming others—as we have come to realize in the wake of the events of September 11.

New times demand new forms. To discuss some thoughts about two kinds of struggle inspired by sacred images of war (1) the karma yoga


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doctrine of dedicated action taught on the Kurukshetra battlefield depicted in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and (2) *jihād*, the teaching of "striving" against evil taught by the Qur'ān, I am presenting this exploration in the form of two letters and a dialogue. These forms enable me to present an examination of war imagery both on the personal level of struggle in individual lives, and on the political level of religious-social activities. In this way I hope to bring important issues into pertinent focus by contextualizing them in daily life. These three discussions, each of which consists of many points, grew out of interactions with other people.

(1) In the first part I seek to depict the archetypal situation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the thoughts I had to encourage my dying father's will to live. This concerns the philosophy of striving on the personal level to fight for one's own life. (2)In the second part I seek for understanding regarding recent acts of violence done in the name of God. In this second part I discuss insights of admired teachers regarding Islam, to bring out far-reaching suggestions in an effort to comprehend these complex topics, and to encourage future efforts to comprehend the challenges of our times. I will explore the issues related to *jihād*, of much concern today, with occasional comparative references to the philosophy of selfless action taught by the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This part is in the form of questions and answers growing from discussions with my teenage daughter. (3) The third part is in the form of a letter to a would-be terrorist. Each of these three angles enables us to consider various aspects of the theme of making an effort for a higher purpose.

## (1) "What Can I Do?" "You Must Fight" on the Personal Level: Midnight Thoughts for my Father Dying of Cancer

> "Therefore, severing with the sword of knowledge this ignorance-born doubt about the Self, dwelling in your heart, be established in yoga. Stand up, Bharata." —*Bhagavad Gītā* IV. 42.

> "Those who strive for Us, We guide them in Our ways....Whoever strives, he only strives for his own self....Strive for God a true striving *(jihād)*." *Qur'ān* 26.69; 29.6; 22.78.

When my father said "What can I do? The doctor told me I'll probably only live another three or four months. I'm beginning to feel withdrawn and lifeless already," I was stunned. Later that night I lay awake thinking about

his situation. A flood of images and ideas about the call to exert one's best effort found in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Qur'ān* came to mind. In a situation where one is up against a life-threatening illness one can find inspiration in ideal figures of noble struggle. At this level everything is rather simple. One person's efforts to fend off illness and be well involve an ideal of struggle which helps individuals make a commitment to work hard and win the prize of life. For example:

A man who has discovered that he has a life-threatening disease needs to fill his consciousness with images of life, hope and energy. Certain symbols, such as that of a soldier striving for a good cause, can mobilize our forces, giving us a program to follow. They orient us to a way of being with implications for all the details of our lives. The major symbols or religious archetypes in the collective unconscious present an ethos and give a person a goal to strive for: they give a person also certain things to avoid. It's not by chance that symbols of creation and stories of origins of different things have been very important to people around the world. They give the imagination a way of conceiving how a life and various parts of the cosmos, and ways of life, came into existence and fit together, and offer clues for people as to how to live productively as time flows on and conflicts arise. It's not by chance that people return again and again to images and activities that articulate divine order—they revivify fading goals of life.[3]

It's also not by chance that war[4] is such an important symbol in many great literatures, and that stories of dualism, battle, and conflicts are kept alive so many centuries. There are archetypal situations in the victory of the Vedic sky god Indra over Vritra the serpent whose constrictive coils held back the energies of life, the fight of Rāma against the demonic forces *(rākshasas),* and the archetypal battle[5] of the *Bhagavad Gita.* The reason that these are prominent in ongoing Hindu tradition may be expressed in the saying: "Life is always fighting for life." Every moment is a crisis, a crossroads, a crucial time for momentous decisions. To fight successfully in life you need to direct your energies efficiently and deploy your forces carefully. You need to have the kind of careful disciplined strategies which add up well in an all-out effort to win battles. You ultimately must marshall all your good strengths to be victorious in the war which is a life and death struggle. And you need to have a philosophy which helps you find attainment even if there are setbacks or losses, upsets or defeat.

You need to take care, consciously. The other side, the forces that oppose, consists of elements of decay, processes of chaos and destruction undermining the necessary balances that make for health. It seems that the fight for life, or war against imminent destruction caused by disease, is a very operative metaphor even if it is not very consciously or methodically brought out into the open. The importance of conceiving of one's situation as like being in a fight, and being willing to muster all one's strengths to beat the enemy in this struggle is a constant reference point used by doctors and nurses in hospitals. It offers a way of understanding and coping which is absolutely necessary even if it is not always fully presented to patients in all its ramifications. Looked at in this light, going through this experience could be thought of as a kind of initiation into deeper knowledge, becoming a fighter for life.[6] One is literally fighting for one's own life and by learning about this one is becoming a warrior for life, making the most of the chance to life that one has. For some people overcoming illness has been a life-transforming experience.[7] If one does not resolve to make a disciplined effort with hope then one is vacillating or drifting in retreat, not marshalling one's forces, not alert. Losing alertness one relies on the unconscious, and in a war situation it may not be possible merely to rely on the unconscious. (Even in Taoism which values unconscious wisdom there are times for taking conscious action to preserve life.) One cannot just sleep through dangerous battles.

There is an urgency to all this. Krishna's memorable command in the *Gītā* dramatizes this: "Arise!"[8] Get up, bestir yourself, he tells Arjuna, until Arjuna says "My delusion is destroyed...I am firm now; I am firm and freed from my doubts; I will act inspired by your word."[9] But this impulse to work has to come from inside, one can't just wait until everything gets better by itself. You have to rouse the will to live and see each medicine as contributing to this struggle. Each mouthful of food, and each exercise and each thought, are parts of a positive, disciplined conscious choice, an effort in the direction toward winning health, toward this order again after a time of battle. Even though the outcome is very important in this life and death struggle, you have to have the spirit of the warrior, the hero who knows that in a battle if you get caught up in with paralyzing forces of fear and worry it will not to make for the best outcome. All our strength must go into a true, heroic struggle, and so in various stories—Arjuna in the *Gītā* in India, the Samurai tradition of Japan, and the heroes of the Iliad of ancient Greece—there are images

of warriors who fight the good fight. They teach the spirit of fearlessness and non-attachment, the skill of struggling in a mindset of freedom anxiety about the outcome.[10] That kind of warrior spirit of fighting for a higher cause, doing everything for an ultimate victory, gives guidance and orientation to the daily routine. Everyone does have energies that they can draw on. It's amazing to see the power of the will to succeed, the "inner general" doing the necessary things to win—it makes for a very dramatic situation. People do amazing things under pressure. In some stories the gods are said to watch these struggles as a fascinating drama. When a hero is active in the right spirit, immersed in the doing rather than in the outcome. Every other show on TV—cops/robbers, good guys/bad guys—fascinates our unconscious recognition that life itself is a struggle of forces with life hanging in the balance. There is always some kind of heroic endeavor on the part of one marshalling all available forces for life. The hero strives to retrieve order for future balanced wellbeing. There's something very lifelike about this situation.

A great lesson of the *Gītā* on karma yoga involves the encouragement to act free of attachments. Krishna tells Arjuna "Abiding in discipline perform actions, abandoning attachment...Being indifferent to success or failure; discipline is defined as indifference."[11] The ability to play (even when much is at stake) as if one has nothing to lose takes great skill. This attitude takes away the obstacles to optimum performance. It eliminates stress, and the time wasted in worry, the loss of energy stolen by anxiety. There are images in the ancient religions—like Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism—of struggles between good and evil; it's something that's very basic to human nature.[12]

Rather than have the fight be a rather unconscious side of the treatment of illness (or any other major struggle of life—loss of a job, loss of a loved one, loss of home, problems associated with divorce, accidents, traumas, or bravely facing any odds) it's good to have it at the forefront of one's mind. I mean it's good to put a conscious effort into the struggle and really see it like a warrior sees a war to be alert in, to do your best. Go for it. It's not something that you can wait for to go away and be over. You can't go through the treatment without putting all your energies and thoughts into it. Instead you try as hard as you can in the face of all these things that are overwhelming or threatening to make you forget all the good strength that you have, to go forward in that combat for your life.

Who is the enemy? Not pain, that's a signal there's a conflict taking place

somewhere that needs to be looked to; it's an alert "the general" has to do something about. What is the enemy? The enemy is the force of chaos, of destruction undermining the cells expanding at the wrong rate, or in any life situation spiralling out of control. To remedy this effort must be applied, so there are these old methods and new medicines to try to right the situation. You may have thought that retirement meant relaxation but no, here's one more fight you have to complete. One more experience of being a warrior, like the one you went through in Europe when you were in your twenties. Each culture has its hero; the image of Muhammad is to Muslims the heroic ideal who fought against the odds and with God's help won. For Americans maybe it's George Washington, or General Patton, or Audie Murphy.

If you don't consciously implement the imagery of war, you may be letting the chance to live go by. This is not spelled out for the modern patient, or for anyone facing big challenges or seeking recovery. It's only hinted at. It's something one has to catch on to; it's a kind of initiation that is not very consciously organized by the medical profession. Nobody takes responsibility for it—you have one doctor who sees you for one ailment, another doctor for another problem, but there is not one who says, "I'm going to teach you, coach you to be the patient who can win this struggle." They just assume a nurse will maybe help a little with this and the wife will help a little with that and the doctor will help a little with this, and the patient will do all this for himself. It's assumed unconsciously, this disciplined effort, having this "general" in one's own mind.

Yet this careful struggle is most important. This is true for everyone in life, but it's all the more apparent for one suffering a serious illness. Each moment is important to make the most out of life, each day is important to keep moving along with care, putting one's energy into the right things. All of this discipline adds up to a cohesive life that aims in a certain direction and attains fulfillment, integration. But in an illness one does not have a lot of extra energy—and so all of one's forces have to be carefully marshalled. In an illness one can't think of conforming to neighbors' standards, but one must become more independent learning on one's own how to go through these things. There's no standard or usual way which applies in this situation. It is not by chance that the ancient scriptures, epics (such as the *Mahābhārata* with the Kurukshetra battle, and the *Rāmāyana* with Rāma's war against the demon Rāvana), involve conquering and deliverance. Zoroastrianism, Islam, Ragnarok in Norse mythology, the Apocalypse

in the New Testament, all feature an image of the cosmic fight—the perennial conflict in the human condition.

Further, to rediscover that truth is a process that people going through an existential crisis can experience for themselves. They re-discover in reality what the Arjuna or Jihadi archetype is all about, as if for the first time. There are those who might object to my bringing this kind of imagery to someone who is ill. "What if their way of coping is to forget about it or not to worry about it, since this may just bring on anxiety." I have to take the risk since this is a life and death situation. "War" images instill courage, discipline and effort. The warrior attitude evokes concentration. Sleep and relaxation are important, but healing isn't all sleep—it's also the rituals of exercise, readiness, resistance.

"Surrendering all actions to the Lord, with your thoughts on Self, freed from illusory hope and selfishness, cured of mental fever, engage in the battle," Krishna urges Arjuna.[13] In therapeutic efforts one interiorizes, personally becoming the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Vedas, the *Qur'ān*, New Testament, or Old Testament, through participation in that spirit that is for life. In this sense there's a wisdom of war, a logic of the warrior spirit. We win not by luck but pluck. This ideal of heroism should not be considered a false notion, passe in sophisticated postmodern times. For someone striving, putting his or her best effort into whatever challenge arises, it's not about glory of war but doing it for a higher cause, acting out of dedication and love.

You can't rest till it's time to rest. (As another Yogi said "It ain't over till it's over!") You don't know the outcome but if you want to live you have to do all in your power, and if you've done your best it gives you good cause to rest. If salt loses its savor, call to mind your memories of the good things you've done with your life, serving your country and your family, you've salted away over the years. If you feel like recalcitrant material being called upon to become some further incarnation of yourself remember the ancient Taoist sage's joke: "If my left arm turns into a rooster, I'll crow to the dawn! If my buttocks become wheels and my spirit becomes a horse, I'm my own chariot!"[14] Whatever life turns our bodies into, can't we try to make music out of it?

That's the karma yoga hero. Spirituality is a call to arms ("Awake! Arise! and fight despair!") to rouse people who are not looking on the present situation as a critical juncture that could go either way. If our full capacity does not come into play we will likely lose. If religions at

their best stimulate human beings to their best, bringing our deepest energies into play, so the utmost can be achieved—like "the moral equivalent of war." Consciousness is a vast pool, the mysterious spirit of vitality, giving resilience to our failing flesh. When it comes right down to it, this is what it's all about; in life and death crises (your loved ones', your own), actual existence at stake, we pray to find the inspiration to fight on.[15]

All of this testifies to the fact that in the Kurukshetra situation in the *Gītā,* and in the urgings of the *Qur'ān* to strive for God (*jihād*) there is wisdom regarding skill and effort, when taken on the personal level as we try to keep our own lives afloat.

## (2) "How Does a Deluded Jihād Happen?" Social Strife and Soul Struggle Dialogue with a Teenage Daughter about Terrorism

> "...our modern Ulema do not see that the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organization as on the worth and power of individual men...Thus a false reverence for past history and its artificial resurrection constitute no remedy for a people's decay."
>
> —Muhammad Iqbal[16]

> "He who in his folly commits acts that are forbidden forfeits even his life as his acts miscarry...Gentleness to all creatures, contentment, patience, poise, and respect for one's friends add to one's life span."
>
> —The *Mahābhārata*[17]

The audacious attacks of September 11 have changed many aspects of American life. The following dialogue inquires into the historical and psychological background of misused images of fighting for the sake of God, with occasional references to the doctrine of karma yoga taught by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā.*

**What could cause such disastrous self-delusions so that terrorists think they're doing things for God, things which others see as diabolical? How does it happen that someone branded as evil by one side (Osama bin Laden by America) has a blind spot and sees only the negative of his opponent as an obvious enemy of God? What blindspots in our view made us unaware that wrath was brewing against us—our addiction to oil?**[18]

We have to look at the combination of things that will help us understand the recent attack and the resulting "war on terrorism." Many things enter into this picture. An important part, to be sure, is asking where deluded *jihād* comes from and what is it an aberration of, and how shall we look into our own blindspots.[19]

**But how could such confusion happen? Someone thinking he's righteous performs violent acts seeming so shameful, and the obvious certainties (of who is good and saved and who is evil and damned) are the exact opposites when seen from a terrorist's eyes? Is it that blindspots keep vision narrow and focussing on one's own self-interest, and narrow interpretation causes a loss of the whole picture, and so one side projects its bias onto the other side? Doesn't Islam have a long history of being at odds with the West—with invasions and crusades in the background?**

Well, maybe James Hillman is right when he says that a religious or a secular monotheistic consciousness tends to identify with a single point of view, and this forces others into being evil opponents pure and simple through oppositional thinking and "true believer" mentality.[20] Especially if someone is conditioned to see everything in black and white with no shades of grey. But wait a minute. To begin to talk about these issues and search for answers we need the ideas of thinkers who had insights before Nine One One happened. We need to look into history, literature, psychology. For example, even one term, "Islam," is a word used in at least three different ways. 1.) Personal self-commitment of the individual Muslim's submission to God in faith, subjective dedication. 2.) A transcendent ideal of a perfect order to strive for and attain as far as possible. 3.) The empirical actuality, the whole institutional system as it actually occurs in history.[21] So when someone uses the word we have to consider which meaning is intended: the personal-spiritual, the perfect ideal meaning, or the actual cultural manifestation, warts and all. And of course there is the term of emerging importance— "Islamist" to denote those engaged in radical political projects, distinguishing the extremists from the devoted mainstream Muslims who are generally not political extremists.

**Is Islam (meaning # 3, the actual on-the-ground religion) different from the other world religions?**

Islam is uniquely configured, being the most "entity-like" organization

and system, more reified than any other world faith, according to Wilfred Cantwell Smith.[22] That means it's historically been conceived and organized as a separate self-contained religion, more so than the others.[23] In its origins it is more about forming a society spread over the world under one divine law, submitting to God. Hinduism, for example, is less orgnaized as a formal system.[24] There are big implications if you see yourself as only always unique, rather at odds with all that is not your kind. It is significant that the first year in the Muslim calendar is the year the community was formed, not the year of Muhammad's birth or the first Qurānic revelation, etc.

This goal of a community, a worldwide society submitted (*islam* means "submission") to God in history is a key point making Islam unique. Other religions are more about individual salvation, personal liberation, a sanctified life, etc. Moses, for example, was also involved in nation building, but it was limited to the twelve tribes of Israel, not the whole world. The constitution of Medina, drawn up by Muhammad and his followers, articulated the self-identity of this new community in rather militant language: "The charter of Muhammad the prophet amongst the believers and the Muslims of the Quraysh and of Yathrib, and amongst those who follow them and attach themselves to them and fight alongside them. There is one community over against mankind."[25]

**The word *jihād* in the *Qur'ān*—it means struggle?**

Right. Traditionally, *jihād* takes three main forms—striving against enemies of Islam and Allah, against Satan, and against inner evil inclinations. *Jihād* means striving, engaging in righteous strife. *Jihād* is mentioned in 28 verses of the *Qur'ān*. For example, "Fight in Allah's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit agression [or transgress limits]...Slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away—for oppression is even worse than killing....Fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to Allah alone."[26] (The Arabic word for oppression which endangers Muslims is *fitna*. The Arabic for struggling against oppression is *qital*.) The command to fight oppression or persecution is strong. *Fitna*, oppression, is said to be worse than killing. So the defining of oppression is crucial—obviously, for some Muslims, such as bin Laden and the hijackers, the policies of America are deemed oppression, and so launching attacks is not seen as transgressing the *Qur'ān*'s limits, but as *qital*.[27]

But let us look at such *qital* more closely. *Jihād* by the sword has four con-

ditions. Fighting must be initiated by unbelievers; there has to be *extreme* persecution of Muslims; the aim of the unbelievers' persecution must be destruction of Islam; the goal of Muslims is self-defense and protection. The great 9th-century Muslim scholar Tabari affirmed the interpretation ascribed to Muhammad—that one should never attack women, children, the elderly or a peacemaker who commits no agression. *Jihād* according to *hadīth* (traditionally accepted anecdotes about the prophet's life and teachings) is spoken of in various ways. To do *jihād* with one's wealth and life is best,[28] yet those who came from a battle were told by Muhammad they were coming from a lesser *jihād* to the greater *jihād*—fighting against one's own desires.[29] So the belligerent *jihād* is deemed "minor," and the "major *jihād*" is against one's own arrogance and egoism. The prophet also said the greatest *jihād* was to speak the word of truth to a tyrant.[30] And it is said in the *hadīth* that *jihād* involves enjoining the doing of good, forbidding the doing of evil, speaking truth in a situation of trial, and having enmity for the wrong doer; and the effort one makes in undertaking the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) is also said to be the most excellent *jihād,* perhaps indicating that to journey to the center of the faith is an arduous task of dedication.[31] In a classical commentary intellectual persuasion by wise argument is greater than *jihād* by sword.[32]

The *Qur'ān* states, "Those who believe, and suffer exile and strive with might and main, in Allah's cause, with their goods and their persons, have the highest rank in the sight of Allah: they are the people who will achieve (salvation)." And a respected commentary explains the verse: "Here is a good description of *Jihād.* It may require fighting in Allah's cause, as a form of self-sacrifice. But its essence consists in (1) a true and sincere Faith, which so fixes its gaze on Allah, that all selfish or worldly motives seem paltry and fade away, and (2) in earnest and ceaseless activity, involving the sacrifice (if need be) of life, person, or property in the service of Allah. Mere brutal fighting is opposed to the whole spirit of *Jihād,* while the sincere scholar's pen or preacher's voice or wealthy man's contributions may be the most valuable forms of *Jihād.*"[33]

**What about the ones who die in a deluded *jihād* attacking civilians? How are they judged in Islam?**

In May 2001 the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia,[34] Abdul Aziz bin Abdallah Al al-Shaykh, stated that those who kill themselves in such attacks die not as martyrs (*shaheed*) but as suicides. And suicide is strictly forbidden in Islamic

law. Of course the fringe extremists don't listen to that authority, even though the *Qur'ān* has warnings against unjustified *jihād,* such as: "O ye who believe! When ye go forth (to fight) in the way of Allah, be careful to discriminate, and say not unto one who offereth you peace: 'Thou art not a believer,' seeking the chance profits of this life (so that ye may despoil him). With Allah are plenteous spoils. Even thus (as he now is) were ye before; but Allah hath since then been gracious unto you. Therefore take care to discriminate. Allah is ever Informed of what ye do."[35] And finally, from the standpoint of humanity at large, it's history that judges audacious acts.[36]

**Those who go beyond the limits of a legitimate *jihād*—whose rules are they playing by?**

Anything can be misused. Dedicating one's efforts can be twisted by extremist leaders' political desires into dangerous and catastrophic deluded *jihād.* Simple belief's sincerity can lend itself to horrific acts. There is always a danger that those prone to use violence can rationalize it by reading in the *Gītā* or the *Qur'ān* that they have permission to become selfless instruments of the will of God. The fact that the suicidal hijackers of 9/11 (such as Muhammad Atta) had directions for the last day that included reading the chapter of *Tawbah* ("repentance") in the *Qur'ān* shows that sincerity was an ingredient in their acts; their training glorified and promised rewards for death as martyrdom, and their imaginations were stunted enough to believe that. They were sincere, deluded, and funded by unearned wealth.

Perhaps this makes their acts the very opposite of the karma yoga ideal of the *Gītā.* In karma yoga, one works selflessly for the welfare of the world regardless of rewards. The hijackers are reported to have been mostly young Arabs disappointed in their generation's coming of age in a time when fabulous Arabian wealth could not be taken for granted, and their dissatisfaction with the lack of high status jobs in Arabia. The belief that one is transcending the usual laws in order to cleanse past sins seems fraught with danger. There have to be safeguards, including a guide interpreting the text in nonviolent ways. In the Hindu example, the *Gītā* shows a warrior whose duty is to fight enemy soldiers in a war, their fate already having been decided by God. Seeing the foes as already sentenced by God in this particular situation, he becomes God's instrument.[37]

**Do you ever worry that karma yoga taught by the *Gītā* could lead to something like that? That acting in the name of God and selflessness you might morally justify violent ruthlessness?**

Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) interpreted the *Gītā* as a guide to political activism and thought it advocated violence in a just cause.[38] Gandhi (1869-1948) saw the *Gītā* as a nonviolent text and his philosophy of Satyagraha prohibited violent response. Krishna's teaching in the *Gītā* is that by performing actions without attachment man can attain the highest.[39] According to the *Gītā, m*entally casting all actions upon God, devoted to God, keeping one's mind fixed on God,[40] one is free of the results of action. One's duty, unless like Arjuna one is a soldier at war or a policeman, would not normally involve violence. More than once the *Gītā* describes the ideal karma yogi as one who delights in the welfare of all beings or acting with the attitude of rejoicing in the welfare of all beings.[41] Nobody trembles in fear before such a person,[42] who is free from enmity to all beings,[43] and who lets the law be his authority.[44] So, karma yoga does not lend itself easily to antinomian violence.

Moreover, the dharmic war in the *Gītā* is not the same as historic *jihāds,* such as the invasion of Sindh (Northern India) in the 7th century. The *Mahābhārata* war began as the last resort, after negotiations proved fruitless. As a war engaged in because of duty (*dharmayudhi*) by Arjuna it was not done for expansion of a territory or to convert others to a different religion, or for revenge or for plunder, but with detachment in regard to personal gain or loss, in a pure (*sattvic*) attitude.[45] The *Gītā* teaches that "With self integrated by yoga, [the karma yogi] sees the self residing in all beings, and sees all beings in the self; he sees the same in all he sees."[46] The Lord incarnate tells Arjuna "One who sees me everywhere, and sees the all in Me; I am never lost to him, and he is never lost from me."[47] Such equanimity toward all would seem to be antithetical to launching violent attacks against innocent people.

Thus the *Gītā* has, by and large, not been used by extremists over the centuries as an incitement to do violence. There is no part of the text in which Krishna tells the general reader to kill non-Hindus. But there are statements in the *Qur'ān* that can be taken as giving conditions for killing infidels. The *Gītā* teaches a variety of attitudes, spiritual practices and views, and encourages one to see variety as superimposed over *atman,* spiritual Self of eternal pure consciousness. The *Gītā* is more like a spiritual pep talk giving good reasons to apply one's talents skillfully

even if the outcome will not personally benefit one. The *Gītā* seems to have been written to help seekers interiorize renunciation—it teaches that it is not necessary to give up family and profession to seek liberation. While Buddhism taught monks and nuns to drop out of society and be renouncers, the *Gītā* taught that wherever one is one can offer work selflessly and be a renouncer, finding the highest goal. In Islam the "inner *jihād*" or "major *jihād*" of overcoming egoism is closest to this. The "minor *jihād*" (fighting against unbelievers) as described in the *Qur'ān* involves the dangers of gaining promised spoils of battle as an incentive, historically a practice in the early days of Islam. One fifth of the spoils is the designated amount to be given to the state.

Intertribal raiding was a major activity of the Arabs in Muhammad's time (7th century). Instead of prohibiting it or ignoring it the prophet sought to control it. He is said to have fostered raids on caravans travelling to and from Mecca, and he banned raiding within the Islamic community. Uniting Arab tribes under the banner of the one God, Islam spread. From the start one small faction (Khārijī Muslims) felt Islam meant perpetual war, believing that the Prophet said "My fate is under the shadow of my spear." They cited Quranic verses urging Muslims to prepare the force needed "to make the enemies of God, and your enemies, and others beside them, in a state of dread."[48] Traditionally, those who participate in *jihād* must be adult male believers who are free, sound in mind and body, economically independent, acting with their parents' support.[49]

**What comparisons would you make between *jihād* and karma yoga?**

The Kurukshetra battle was not about two religions in conflict, but about the five Pāṇḍava brothers on one side, who were religious and righteous and heroic, and Duryodhana's atheistic regime on the other, which was immoral and criminal. Of course, much is in the eye of the beholder, so no doubt some *jihādis* killing innocents also imagine they are striking out against evil, if those victims are part of a country branded as infidel by fanatic leaders. Also, those who believe in the *Gītā* say that God was personally present at Kurukshetra, incarnated as Krishna, and Krishna directed the warrior Arjuna to fight. That is not the same as a political terrorist cell inspired by a mullah's interpretation of Quranic verses.

Both Allah and Krishna have their violent sides. For example, Allah in the *Qur'ān* says that if the Prophet had invented against him any sayings "We would have seized him by the right hand and cut his life vein."

Krishna includes the necessity for war in the overall plan and play of the universe, to trim life back to a righteous balance. (And in the Old Testament Yahweh caused a flood to destroy heedless humans.)

**How far can we understand the psychology of terrorism? Is the deluded *jihādi* repressed and frustrated and then he explodes? Do we have a clue?**

James Hillman says, "A terrorist is a result of this whole long process of wiping out the psyche. Corbin said to me one time, 'What is wrong with the Islamic world is that it has destroyed its images, and without these images that are so rich and so full in its tradition, they are going crazy because they have no containers for their extraordinary imaginative power.'"[50] Or maybe we could say the most vivid images terrorists are likely to have are of hated demonic enemies and scenarios of violence, vengeance and martyrdom considered as concrete reality, rather than as unconscious ideas and feelings.

Repression by an individual or a regime may cause the denied desires to surface elsewhere: "The taller the tree, the longer the shadow," it is said. Imagine someone unconsciously putting all their imagination into demonizing others and being trained by a religious leader to take the concept of *jihād* completely literally, with no awareness of the part interpretation plays, but immersed in the context of a culture where hatred is celebrated and rewarded. That's the recipe for turning a spiritual religion into a mania for bloodshed. To fill the whole psyche with hate, death and vengeance is to live on the edge of crisis. On the other hand, mainstream Islam, with daily devotion to the supreme being can cultivate patience and trust in God's wisdom.

**Do you think deluded *jihādis* are basically misfits in today's world?**

Eric Hoffer argues that we're all trying to deal with the new world that's been emerging. "We can never be fit and ready for that which is wholly new. We have to adjust ourselves, and every radical adjustment is a crisis in self-esteem: we undergo a test; we have to prove ourselves. A population subjected to drastic change is thus a population of misfits, and misfits live and breathe in an atmosphere of passion."[51] Hoffer noted that "The chemistry of dissatisfaction is as the chemistry of some marvelously potent tar. In it are the building stones of explosives, stimulants, poisons, opiates, perfumes and stenches."[52] Hoffer dramatizes the power of someone who can offer a glimmer of hope to the hopeless: "Give people pride and they'll live

on bread and water, bless their exploiters, and even die for them...If there is distinction in suffering, we search for martyrdom as for hidden treasure."[53] Hoffer also connects religion to this situation: "Monotheism... is usually the end result of a search for pride...Whenever we proclaim the uniqueness of a religion, a truth, a leader, a nation, a race, a party or a holy cause, we are also proclaiming our own uniqueness,"[54] and perhaps our desire for superiority, which is often a compensation for feeling inferior. But the relations of Faith and Terror to individual self-esteem Hoffer sees as ultimately dissolving rather than building. He calls Faith and Terror "instruments for the elimination of individual self-respect. Terror crushes the autonomy of self-respect, while Faith obtains its more or less voluntary surrender. In both cases the result of the elimination of individual autonomy is—automatism. Both Faith and Terror reduce the human entity to a formula that can be manipulated at will,"[55] the follower becoming a pawn in the strategies of planners.

**Do you think it's like a quantum leap—weakness and fervor to fight for God make deluded *jihādis* go from feeling like nothing to coming alive and feeling as though their lives have meaning?**

The self experiences fears in weakness, agitations which are fraught with paradoxes. Hoffer marvels at the power of weakness in life: "Unlike the pattern which seems to prevail in the rest of life, in the human species the weak not only survive but often triumph over the strong. The self-hatred inherent in the weak unlocks energies far more formidable than those mobilized by an ordinary struggle for existence...Flight from the self almost invariably turns into a rush for a compact group. And certainly, this readiness to unite with others is a source of unequaled strength. Thus the soul intensity generated in the weak endows them as it were with a special fitness. There is sober realism in St. Paul's stilted words that 'God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty.'"[56] There are examples of this David-and-Goliath situation. As when immigrants overcompensate in hard work and achieve extraordinarily, or minorities sometimes show a great drive to thrive and be accepted and be recognized for their excellence. And negative rebellions, suicide bombers, assassins, etc.

"By renouncing the self," suggests Eric Hoffer, "we are getting out from underneath the only burden that is real. For however much we identify ourselves with a holy cause, our fears on its behalf can never be as real and

poignant as our fear and trembling in behalf of a perishable self. The short-lived self, teetering on the edge of irrevocable extinction, is the only thing that can ever really matter. Thus the renunciation of the self is felt as a liberation and salvation."[57] The renunciation of the self is the inward renouncer spirit of karma yoga, and it is the sacrifice which makes *jihād* different from other war and striving. But in the psyches of hopeless enraged men, unconscious of the symbol system they're involved in, it can lead the weak to overzealous hero-worship. Out of the loop, ready to believe rumors, false prophets, and propaganda's promises "It is the weak who strain their ears for a new word, clutch at every promise and rally around a savior and a redeemer."[58] The forgotten unfortunates desiring a chance for meaning, those disenchanted by the modern world seeking to be true believers in a society of simple purity unmixed with profane worldliness heard the call of Al Qaeda, Taliban, etc., and joined from various lands.[59]

**What do you think terrorist misfits seek? How self-aware are they?**

They're probably often ruled by their unconscious processes, living with blinders to keep away complications. "There is perhaps in all misfits a powerful secret craving to turn the whole of humanity into misfits. Hence partly their passionate advocacy of a drastically new social order. For we are all misfits when we have to adjust ourselves to the wholly new."[60] The austere demands for reform, return to an older less corrupt order made by self-appointed prophets, is a recurrent theme in Arabian history.[61] Sometimes the self-styled prophets are half-baked in their religious knowledge and in their self-knowledge. Hoffer sees self-deception, credulity and charlatanism as somehow linked together,[62] and suggests that "Those who remain in the dark about their own motives are as if they were strangers to themselves. Hence perhaps their exceptional power of self-delusion—their ability to talk themselves into anything. Their own impassioned words affect their souls as the words of an outside propagandist."[63] Through wishful thinking and rationalization they persuade themselves and others of what they want to believe. "To have a grievance is to have a purpose in life. A grievance can almost serve as a substitute for hope; and it not infrequently happens that those who hunger for hope give their allegiance to him who offers them a grievance."[64] Add some words of hateful blame, smearing the scapegoat already there in listeners' minds. The grudge flares up into righteous rage. "It is remarkable by how much a pinch of malice enhances the penetrating

power of an idea or an opinion. Our ears, it seems, are wonderfully attuned to sneers and evil reports about our fellow men."[65] Speeches are often bland and dry without some Great Satan to blame, some evil-doer or infidel monster to repudiate. The demonizing of alien "others" is as common today as it was a millennium ago.[66]

**Are Muslims directed to follow rigidly the old ways and the elders?**

No. There are actually *hadīths* meant to dissuade Muslims from the idolatry of that which is old and backward. For example, the one about the prophet Muhammad's companions when they envied an antelope that kissed his feet. Muhammad said: "Prostrate before Allah alone, and as for your elders, only respect them." Slavish behavior toward elders and their ways and views is criticized in traditions like that one, presumably to leave room for adapting to new times.[67]

V.S. Naipaul observes that, "The poet Mohammad Iqbal, when he had put forward his idea for a separate Indian Muslim state in 1930, had spoken of a Muslim polity or social order as something arising naturally out of the 'Islamic principle of solidarity.' Such a polity existed in Pakistan, but the Islamic state couldn't simply be decreed: it had to be invented, and in that invention faith was of little help. Faith, at the moment, could supply only the simple negatives that answered emotional needs: no alcohol, no feminine immodesty, no interest at the banks. But soon in Pakistan these negatives were to be added to: no political parties, no parliament, no dissent, no law courts. So existing institutions were deemed un-Islamic and undermined or undone; the faith was asserted because only the faith seemed to be whole; and in the vacuum only the army could rule."[68] It may seem odd that a religious tradition in which the formation of a community devoted to submitting to a divinely ordained way of life would have such difficulties when trying to form a modern government. Muslim states have often been less successful than the modern Indian democracy with its Hindu majority of citizens and the second largest Muslim community in the world. (Indonesia is largest.)

A modern Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi was forward looking, and it seemed as if Hindus in his time were ready for a change. India utilized the U.S. Constitution to frame its own constitution in 1947. Perhaps those who are inspired by Krishna's teaching in the *Gītā* have a good role model for innovating—life is seen as a drama, a skillful game to play. There are many ways to relate to the divine, and doing one's duty, entering enthusiastically

into one's own talents selflessly one can make a contribution and reach the ultimate. People in India read the epic *Mahābhārata* to learn to be responsible administrators. The modern Indian statesman C. Rajagopalachari, for example, retold the *Mahābhārata* in Tamil, and creatively related its lessons, including dealing with anger, to the constant unfolding of contemporary Indian life. It was a forward looking exercise, not a backward looking one, utilizing a beloved story to harness the mood of a people ready for change and progress.[69]

Lessons from the experiment of the modern Muslim state can be seen in Pakistan, Naipaul suggests. "Pakistan was meant to be an Islamic state, run on Islamic principles. What did that mean? Had there been such a state? He said, 'The state that existed for thirty-two years at the time of the Prophet and the first four caliphs.' So there it was again—the dream not only of the early Islamic state, the creation of the Prophet, but also of the time when Muslims were rightly guided, divinely ruled: a fusion of history and theology, the indestructible alloy of faith. That pure time could come again; Muslims could live in such purity again. They had only to follow the rules. The rules were there; they could be found in the holy book and the traditions."[70] That was the hope of the believers. "And there was the role of the mosque: every Friday, every man, whatever his condition, heard from the mullahs that the laws of men were not to be obeyed if they went against the teachings of the *Koran*. So the Islamic enterprise was stupendous: it was the deliberate creation—with only the *Koran* as the guide—of a state mechanism that would function in the modern world and would be unlike anything else that had evolved."[71]

Iqbal's thinking is explained in a letter he wrote to Jinnah in 1937: "...It is clear to my mind that if Hinduism accepts social democracy it must necessarily cease to be Hinduism. For Islam the acceptance of social democracy in some suitable form and consistent with the legal principles of Islam is not a revolution but a return to the original purity of Islam. The modern problems therefore are more easy to solve for the Muslims than for the Hindus."[72] It is possible that Iqbal saw caste as an insurmountable aspect of Hinduism, and felt that Islam's sense of brotherhood would make Muslims better able to use democracy in the modern world. Yet India, despite its age old "cage of countless compartments" which had insulted the mobile potential of life, made great strides to become more of a meritocracy. There are other ways of insulting the mobility of life, other cage-like compartments that can stultify the mind. Thousands of extreme conserva-

tive *madrāssas* (schools) "sown like dragon's teeth" as Arundati Roy puts it, in Pakistan, funded by Saudi Arabia, look backward to old *jihāds* in hopes of a better future. While Hindu intelligence, industriousness, pragmatic experiments allow for new ventures, and Indian schools produce scientists, computer experts, engineers and cutting edge researchers.

**Scholars of Islam must've noticed the patterns and problems developing for some time. Is that so?**

Of course. For decades. On the background and the actions of Muslims facing the modern age Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote this about the Wahhābīs several decades ago: "The first Islamic movements in the modern period were protests against the internal deterioration. They would call a halt to decadence, summoning Muslim society back to its first purity and order. One of the earliest of these, and the most major, still reverberatingly influential, was the Wahhābīyah in eighteenth-century Arabia. It was puritanical, vigorous, simple. Its message was straightforward: a return to classical Islam. It rejected the corruption and laxity of the contemporary decline. it rejected too the accommodations and cultural richness of the medieval empire. It rejected the introvert warmth and other-worldly piety of the mystic way. It rejected also the alien intellectualism not only of philosophy but of theology. It rejected all dissensions, even the now well-established Shi'ah. It insisted solely on the Law. The classical Law, said the Wahhābīs, is the sum and substance of the faith—and that in its straightest, most rigid, Hanbali version, stripped of all innovation, developed through the intervening centuries. Obey the pristine Law, fully, strictly, singly; and establish a society where the Law obtains. This, they preached, is Islam; all else is superfluous and wrong."[73] Osama bin Laden is an example of an extreme Wahhābī gone wrong. But Saudi Arabia is generally Wahhābī and the sympathy for Osama bin Laden stems from this fundamentalist shared sectarian ethos. By the way, there are maybe half a million Wahhabis in America trying to live a strict life in a permissive society.

**It seems the most famous preachers, writers and teachers of Islam are fundamentalists. Why do we hear most from defensive conservative voices?**

The public apologists of Islam for the past 50 years and more have set the tone and often the limits to Muslim thought in our time. Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out that Muslim apologetics (the endeavor to prove, to oneself or others, that Islam is sound) are crucial to understand-

ing of recent Muslim writings and endeavors. "For an almost overwhelming proportion of current Muslim religious thinking comes under this heading. Most books and speeches on the faith by those within it today are defensive. They try to champion rather than to understand, to buttress rather than to elucidate."[74] Wilfred Cantwell Smith diagnosed the problem inherent in this approach taken by modern Muslim thinkers: "The basic disruption of apologetics is that it has diverted the attention of contemporary Islamic thinkers from their central task—the central task of all thinkers: to pursue truth and to solve problems. A lack of integrity always leads to disintegration; and any failure of intellectual integrity in a society raises the threat of disastrous intellectual disintegration. The Muslim world, including its intelligentsia, has hardly recognized what a responsible crucial role its intellectual class plays in the present crisis; and how far the future of Islam and of the Muslim community depends on the ability of the intellectual to face, understand, analyze, and solve the new issues that confront them. In so far, accordingly, as thinkers and writers have succumbed to the apologist tendency, there is a very serious danger. For the function of reason has then not been seen as that of ascertaining new truth and solving new problems—and particularly, not religious truth or religious problems. They have turned to an interpretation of Islam, presumed or explicit, according to which the solving of problems, spiritual, moral and social is the function of revelation, of Islam…there is danger in a tendency to view Islam—or any religion—not as an imperative that places on man the responsibility to strive, but rather as a system that relieves him of that responsibility. And many an apologist's exposition of Islam aims not at inviting implementation but applause….For those who have lost touch with transcendence, apologetics becomes the intellectualized self-righteousness of one's community and its past."[75] Defensive self-esteem building is no substitute for the creativity needed to face a new day. We need to look to history for examples of the culturally creative, the problem solvers and discoverers in Islam, to see the best. Thinkers like the poet Muhammad Iqbal, Afghan peace activist Badshah Khan, and scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr. It is ominous that in some places like Algeria, Turkey, and Egypt some of the best and brightest thinkers and artists have been imprisoned or killed. This is a pruning that defeats survival of a healthy Islam—those left are less able to interact with the postmodern world. That kind of repression ensures devolution. Religions need programs of reform, encouragement to live for the ideals of the faith, not just

die for them.[76] Religion does not relieve us of personally working out the new answers to new problems.

**Are there factions in Islam that are open to new ideas?**

Yes. There are broadminded voices, though the ultraconservatives often try to silence them. Throughout history, the best Sufis, inspired by love, knew that fear was not the best stimulus to intelligent decision making, or the creative response to problems. The early success of Islam was not a chance occurrence. Inquiry into the earlier times of great success reveals Muslims with an expansive zestful curiosity, an ability to embrace the new. For example, Naipaul observed that "The *Chachnama* [an old historical account of the conquest of Sindh (India)] shows the Arabs of the seventh century as a people stimulated and enlightened and disciplined by Islam, developing fast, picking up learning and new ways and new weapons (catapults, Greek fire) from the people they conquer, intelligently curious about the people they intend to conquer. The current fundamentalist wish in Pakistan to go back to that pure Islamic time has nothing to do with a historical understanding of the Arab expansion. The fundamentalists feel that to be like those early Arabs they need only one tool: the *Koran*. Islam, which made the seventh-century Arabs world conquerors, now clouds the minds of the successors or pretended successors."[77] These frank words from Naipaul are not so far from some of the prophet Muhammad's own teachings—he advised Muslims to "seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave even if you have to travel as far as China to find it."[78] (Wisdom from China includes: "Those who wish to conquer and control the world, and make it conform to their wishes, never succeed. The world is God's own vessel, and human interference cannot shape it to suit human will. Whoever reaches for mastery of it spoils it. Whoever tries to hold onto it is doomed to lose it."[79]) Adventure, not repetition, is needed for vitality.[80] Curtailing women's rights, exercising power harshly over others, blaming scapegoats, etc., is no substitute for real thinking, carrying forward a great tradition into new times, inventing new solutions inspired by one's highest vision of truth; this in itself is probably the most demanding "striving."

**I guess nostalgia is frowned upon. Idealism or a sort of magical faith in a golden past alone will always be disappointing anyway. Is Hinduism more forward looking?**

Naipaul poignantly tells of meeting a Pakistani who said he remembered

hearing news of the formation of Pakistan in 1947: "To me it was like God, this country of Pakistan." Naipaul asks: "But wasn't that where the *failure started*? Wouldn't it have been better if the creation of Pakistan had been seen as a political achievement, something to build on, rather than as a victory of faith, something complete in itself? Wasn't that the flaw in the Iqbal speech? 'At critical moments in their history it is Islam that has saved Muslims and not *vice versa*.' Wouldn't it have been better for Muslims to trust less to the saving faith and sit down hard-headedly to work out institutions? Wasn't that an essential part of the history of civilization, after all: the conversion of ethical ideals into institutions."[81] Faith involves trusting God and making an effort to make something better of life, not a kind of magical thinking. An attitude of rejecting, forming a state leaving out all not in the *Qur'ān*, is a very different attitude from the Hindu one of including—eclecticism.

A line in the Vedas says, "Let good come to us from every side." That view is open to gathering the good elements of life wherever they are found. It is a view that allows for progressive modernization without losing the essentials of tradition. Thus, Nehru when he was Prime Minister of India could happily admit that the American Declaration of Independence "greatly influenced" India's Constitution. He said he came to the United States to learn from America and learn about the world through American eyes. Nehru, like other modern Indians, admired America's vital energy and youthful spirit of growth.[82] Nehru learned from many sources.

Variety in unity is a recurrent theme in Hindu culture. India has no definitive single text; the Vedas, the Epics, Purāṇas and Āgamas—all are scriptures that have inspired various communities over the centuries. Smārta brahmans updated Hinduism, leaving some rituals and texts behind, translating essentials into new songs and poems and stories.[83] Hinduism in general has the expectation of renewal, adjustment, change—new generations of singers put the old teachings in new forms. There is a continuity through continual re-translation, but not a literalism or an insistence on exact sameness. Hindus tolerate approximate renderings. Change is inevitable, and yet one must save the essentials, so that the Rajas and the Maharajas, and the British Raj, after their days in the sun, gave way to Swarajya in the form of democracy without loss of basic faith.

Perhaps today we all need to reconsider our identities—how much of humanity do we include in our sense of "us" in this time of great change? Wilfred Cantwell Smith explained that, "The third new element in modern

Islam [besides nationalism and apologetics] is dynamism: the appreciation of activity for its own sake, and at the level of feeling a stirring of intense, even violent emotionalism."[84] There is a "them-against-us" sensibility that has been developing for a long time. Arabs are subjected to intrusive cultural ('Coca-colonization'), military, economic and political dominance and influence. "Actually, the whole of humanity lives in this kind of world ...all of us are faced with a modernity that undermines our past and challenges our survival. But few Arabs realize this; most see the novelty as alien, a disruption from outside and see other human beings—particularly the West—not as sharing their distress but as inflicting it."[85]

Actually many other decent people share discomfort with free market culture, its exploitative mean-spirited qualities, where the most sensational and most hyped rather than the best often prevails. Drugs, sexual exploitation, obnoxious ads, greed and unrestrained worldly endeavors seem a dangerous forsaking of spiritual values and standards to many people today. And we all should want a strong and healthy Islam, and a strong and healthy Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc., insofar as those traditions give followers wisdom and compassion.

## 3. The *Gītā* in the *Qur'ān* and the *Qur'ān* in the *Gītā*
## An Open Letter to a Would-Be Terrorist

> "They are the ones who buy Error in place of Guidance and Torment in place of Forgiveness. Ah! What boldness (they show) for the Fire!"
>
> —*Qur'ān* 2.175.[86]

> "O ye who believe! Seek help with patient Perseverance and Prayer, for Allah is with those who patiently persevere."
>
> —*Qur'ān* 2.153.[87]

I grew up after WW II in smalltown Illinois, where there were no Muslims. I first encountered Muslims when I was travelling to India in 1970, on a train from Munich to Istanbul. At that time I met Muslim laborers returning to their villages in Turkey. They were fasting until sunset because it was Ramadan. In Iran I heard the call to prayer over and over each day until one night, dozing off I was not sure if the chanting was echoing in my own soul or was coming over the loudspeaker. I enjoyed reading Saadi while on the road. In graduate school studying comparative religion I got to know Muslims as friends and fellow students, and met scholars who intro-

duced me to the wealth of spirituality in Islam. One friend of mine was among the Christian clergymen who travelled to Iran during the hostage crisis. He returned with greater awareness of the suffering of Iranians under the US-backed Shah and his secret police. I realize in part how painful such injustices can be, and how aggrieved Muslims who have suffered under US policies must feel. I hope you don't mistake disgruntled roars of hatred for your own religious calling. The unique strengths of Islam have taken a place in my mind as a tremendous religious force in the world. The unifying simplicity of devotion and the generosity of spirit in Islam are very impressive. In my studies and in teaching about world religions for twenty years I have experienced encounters with Islam as deepening explorations of vast depths, appreciating Muslims' great commitment and powerful sense of the sacred.[88]

The relationship of Islam to the West is a very important matter. In fact, Muhammad's challenge to the West was of a uniquely largescale importance—the kind that comes along very rarely. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote several decades ago: "Until Karl Marx and the rise of communism, the Prophet organized and launched the only serious challenge to Western civilization that it has faced in the whole course of its history. How serious a challenge, how menacing a threat it once seemed is worth recalling. The attack was direct, both military and ideological. And it was very powerful …Islam is the only positive force that has won converts away from Christianity—by the tens of millions. It is the only force that has proclaimed that Christian doctrine is not only false but repulsive."[89] The old resentment and rivalry linger from the crusades and other wars, each side righteously claiming superiority. Memories of friendships, mutual endeavors, and cultural contributions back and forth need to be strengthened.

We're at a different crossroads now, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote, "…for all of us, in any nation, the question of ideals is of utterly crucial practical importance—of ideals and their relation to immediate history. It is quite possible, and to outsiders obvious, that North America, despite its technological prowess, material affluence, and tolerably adequate political structure, may lead itself and the world to inconceivable disaster because of intellectual shallowness, moral obtuseness, or an inadequate vitality of its ideals. Indeed. the various intellectual and moral issues are today themselves internationalized. We would contend that a healthy, flourishing Islam is important not only for the Muslims but for all the world today… The West is slow…in realizing that the Muslim segment of human society

can flourish only if Islam is strong and vital, is pure and creative and sound, and only if there is an at least moderately happy relation with mutual understanding between it and the rest of man's systems."[90] Anyone with wisdom therefore wants to wish the Muslim community well.

We are all related in a situation of mutuality. Wilfred Cantwell Smith put it this way: "These issues raise…the crux of both Western civilization and Christianity: their relations with other men. The fundamental weakness of both in the modern world is their inability to recognize that they share the planet not with inferiors but with equals…There is nothing irreverent in noting that the future of the Muslim peoples' faith has still to be determined.…The Islam that was given by God is not the elaboration of practices and doctrines and forms that outsiders call Islam, but rather the vivid and personal summons to individuals to live their lives always in His presence and to treat their fellow men always under His judgements."[91]

It speaks ill of God to picture him as gaining something from blood shed in his name. The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s teachings regarding the duty of soldiers do not do that, and neither do the injunctions of the *Qur'ān,* when seen as timeless revelation regarding inner resolve. The misuse of a part of the text to justify murder is an error, just as the misuse of the Bible to justify slavery in America was an error. Texts and symbols always lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, that is what makes them meaningful over the tests of long centuries.

The Prophet Muhammad is an historical figure, to be sure, but he is also an archetype in the religious imagination. Which aspect of him will you focus on—his later soulfully peaceable personality? Or an earlier more bellicose aspect, from the part of his story when he fought to preserve his life under violent attack? Similarly, in Christianity, Jesus said "Turn the other cheek," but he is also the stern judge dividing the sheep from the goats at the Last Judgement. In Hinduism, the child Krishna could gracefully destroy violent emissaries sent to assassinate him, and could as an adult withdraw from the battlefield after many skirmishes with an enemy. Interpreters focus their emphasis on certain aspects. Taking something literally is not the only way of taking it seriously. The greatness of wisdom literature is its balance, not onesidedness; the greatness of World Religions is partly in the way they re-inforce and balance each other.

People can ask themselves: "What would Muhammad do?" or "What would Arjuna do?" in divining the appropriate methods of struggle. Personalities respond in different ways to conflicts. Buddha's answer was "Hate

never overcomes hate." Jesus' answer was "Love your enemy." Lincoln's answer was that each side thinks God is on that side but maybe God is concerned with an outcome beyond either side's bias. Gandhi's answer, *satyāgraha*, was always to be ready to protest and suffer for injustice, to enter a jail cell "like a groom entering the bridal chamber," and to find a non-violent solution with which both sides could live. And Gandhi influenced an Afghan named Badshah Khan, known as the "Muslim Gandhi." You may not hear much about him, but his heroism for peace is still celebrated in Afghanistan today, the way he involved tribesmen in nonviolent resistance. He searched and found traditions in Islam encouraging peaceful political activism. How many forgotten heroes like him are there?

Perhaps we can visualize in Islamic history a double helix—one side the external social orthodoxy, more militant and legalistic; the other side the inner spirituality represented by the best of the Sufis—with gentle love and creativity. Rabbia al-Adawiyya (d. 801) outshone the dry legal experts and declared she was so full of love for Allah that there was no room for hatred even of the devil. The wise philosopher al Ghazzali (d. 1111) was, early in his career, struck dumb because of his intellectual pride, and he travelled to seek true knowledge. Growing in understanding he was able to sort out spiritual issues of the 12th century. He was a world class thinker, creative, incisive, broadminded, helpful, able to persuade readers with his spiritual wisdom and inspired synthesis. Some Sufis, such as Saadi (d. 1292) were poet-storytellers, able to use humor to explode the ego and free the mind. Rumi (d. 1273), the great Sufi poet who was born in Afghanistan wrote verses which evoke mysteries of the heart, conundrums of the soul, appealing to poets, singers, lovers, musicians, mystics and intellectuals. (How many of bin Laden's lines will be remembered 700 years from now, as Rumi's are?) Sufis created masterpieces in literature, art, architecture, music, dance, and gardens. They were the geniuses of inner *jihād*, knowing that paradox can be a sign of higher truth, a mystery resolved in bewildering love, not a horror irreducibly driving us to berserk fury. At its best Sufism represents a way of spiritual balance and integration of the human personality.

As a university teacher I have noticed that most young Muslims have not even been taught that the great creative figures in Islam's past were often Sufis. To take such spiritual figures as black sheep of the family or even as enemies is a mistake that impoverishes. The alternative to Sufi love is based in dread. The conception of God as the obliteration of the ungodly

seems powerful in our emotional age. Extremist clerics embracing fire power as if God is a sacred explosion, paying the greatest homage to God through war, with violence as the highest offering often fill our newspaper headlines. Locked in a narrowly concocted martyr paradigm, sacrificing unsuspecting victims, hoping to storm heaven and transcend a hopeless situation on earth, terrorists shock the world. A generation denied a glimpse of love and peace, deprived of hope, given instead a generous helping of paranoia and the weapon of self-destruction, the suicide bomb, develops a sense that violence is inevitable. The moth believes it is finding the sun, but it is burning in the candle flame. Culture celebrating hatred and revenge makes people forget that the 99th most beautiful name of Allah is Sabr, the Patient One. Patience, forgiveness, and reliance on God form the greater *jihād,* even according to mainstream Muslim traditions.[92] A balance of the double helix—external social orthodoxy and the internal reverence found in genuine Sufism—can bring out the sustainable vitality of a great faith. At least as an historian of religions that seems likely to me.

The medieval urge, the yearning to return to satisfying simplicity in the modern world is understandable. It would seem there is not enough nourishment for the soul in unrelieved modern culture, in commercial market culture, in superficial mass media culture. Sufism is a soulful side of Islam that traditionally finds underlying meaning in the complications of the world. Sufism allows coexisting ways, conversations with the other inhabitants of the earth. Historically, creative Sufis were the ones capable of putting the faith into expression, translating and restating the spirit of it. Such people are capable of finding ways to embrace modernity without destroying the traditions of Islam. They are good dialogue partners, affirming that various people have various paths to the sacred. They can appreciate that many faiths do have a wisdom literature—that there are many "People of the Book" not just two or three. The recognition of human diversity and basic human rights has changed much in recent decades.

In earlier ages those with a strong belief might feel justified in dictating and dominating, judging and condemning "heathens" holding incorrect doctrines. Secular democracies call for respect for diversity, and medieval prejudice and imperial enthusiasms are on the wane. Listening for the "still small voice" within, each in our own way, in today's world, Sufi traditions are still inspiring. Sufism's spirit encompasses variety and is a force for harmonizing differences, including even the Shiite-Sunni division.

We can learn from others, as well. The Jain philosophical tradition of

"Somehowism" (Syādvāda)—is the understanding that somehow a wide spectrum of views of reality can be held by human beings. Like spokes of a wheel, each viewpoint somehow coexists, having a place in the whole, and each is valid for the part of humanity which holds it. This is intellectual *ahimsa,* tolerance of mind, respecting that many views have a right to exist. We can also learn from poets to be more comfortable with paradox. Both Sufi poets and terrorists have vivid imaginations, both evoke a sense of urgency, both appeal to the sublimely irrational, but one path results in death and tragic weeping, the other in deepening spirituality. Poetic creations make a world for the imagination; politics builds a power structure. Poetry's universal voice can resonate for centuries, exploring deep shared experiences of our psyches. Regimes and their political theories come and go, violence flares and fades, but a masterpiece lives and provides nourishment for many generations.

Caught up in a mood of loss we lose hope. Yet, despite all the strife in the world, methods for the peaceful resolution of our many problems are still available to those who seek them. The human spirit's resilience should not be forgotten. The truth is, most problems are never solved, they just grow obsolete, fade into the background as more pressing issues and new crises come to the fore. (Louis Dumont said Russians doubted the bureaucracy of Russia's communist party could ever be dissolved, yet where is it today?) Humans are not born with hate in their genes, but share in the universe's resilience, intelligence and creativity-wisdom in our hearts, inner light—*nūr muhammadī.*[93]

I wonder if you agree with me that all of the great religions teach the Golden Rule in some form or other? The *Mahābhārata* includes the teaching: "This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others what you would not have done unto you."[94] The Muslim tradition includes the teaching "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."[95] If there is a universal virtue we can promote regardless of race, religion or political structure, isn't it compassion? "Compassion is probably the only anti-toxin of the soul. Where there is compassion even the most poisonous impulses are relatively harmless....Compassion alone stands apart from the continuous traffic between good and evil proceeding within us."[96] The *Qur'ān,* in its most universal passages, and the *Bhagavad Gītā,* and Sufi and *bhakti* verses, too, all celebrate and seek to inspire and cultivate compassion. "Rejoicing in the welfare of all" is the ideal which the *Gītā* articulates.[97] The *Gītā* also analyzes the process in which anger causes

delusion, which causes confusion of memory, which ruins one's reasoning power, which can be fatal.[98]

It may be comforting to know we're all in the same boat. Nobody has it simple anymore; "postmodern" means just that: complications. We all have our wounds to bear (even Muhammad was wounded in the face during one battle, wasn't he?), and no one has all his wishes come true. America is inhabited by some people just as Godfearing as you are, and the sacred sands of Arabia harbors some who are corrupt atheists. Nothing is perfectly simple. Perhaps the deluded *jihāds* of our times have to do with a misguided insistence on monolithic simplicity where it doesn't belong. Rage, no matter how great, can't bring utopias. A society needs minorities, dissent, and diversity to moderate its extremes. A person in this era needs many ideas of self-identity. Each of us plays multiple roles, each soul has many colors. Reductionists allowing only an overly simple identity abort a larger human vision, whether they are Chinese communists, Christian fundamentalists or Taliban. The fear of being swallowed by modernity and losing one's great heritage and one's soul is understandable, but can't it also be a deep "Islam" (submission) to embrace human complications with faith?"

There are rich spiritual resources in Islam. For example, the *Qur'ān* includes this passage: "Cain's soul prompted him to slay his brother; he killed him and thus became one of the lost....We laid it down for the Israelites that whoever killed a human being, except as a punishment for murder or other wicked crimes, should be looked upon as though he had killed all mankind; and that whoever saved a human life should be regarded as though he had saved all mankind."[99] To save life is thus proclaimed a holy task encouraged by Allah.

There are already voices of free conscience in the Muslim community though we often don't hear them, honest voices, wise voices, voices for progress. For example, Dr. Abdelhameed al-Ansari, dean of Qatar University's law school recently asked, "How does a terrorist become a hero? What is happening to the collective Arab outlook? What is happening to our famous Islamic scholars?...We should solve this problems from its roots. Education is the key." Political scientist Shafeed Ghabra of Qatar said "The Lebanese civil war is not an American creation; neither was the Iran-Iraq war; neither was bin Laden. These are our creations. We need to look inside. We cannot be in this blame-others mode forever."[100] Pakistani writer Izzat Majeed writes: "We Muslims cannot keep blaming the West for all our ills....It is not just the poverty, the illiteracy and the absence of any com-

monly accepted social contract that define our sense of wretchedness; it is rather, the increasing awareness among us that we have failed as a civil society by not confronting the historical, social and political demons within us....Without a reformation in the practice of Islam that makes it move forward and not backward, there is no hope for us Muslims anywhere."[101] The respected Muslim scholar Fazlur Rahman asserts that a regression to medievalism is anti-Quranic.[102]

Many Muslims are convinced that God allows individual reflective thought which enables people to become conscious, that God authored diversity and takes no joy in acrid hatred. Yet many hide their views from noisy fundamentalist intolerance, knowing that stirred resentments seek scapegoats. Just as America's voices of soul-searching and self-criticism should not be silenced by Americans, so too, Muslims with a progressive vision of their faith must not be censored in the name of cultural chauvinism.

Foundations for progressive Islamic thought already exist. Muhammad Iqbal was a farsighted 20th-century Muslim poet and religious thinker who was born in the Punjab, who tried to resolve the problems of Islam looming beyond his own time. He upheld the unalloyed monotheism of the faith and the brotherhood it made possible. As a poet he was influenced not only by Rumi, but also by Dante (whose *Divine Comedy* he answered with a long poem of his own) and Goethe. Not all of Iqbal's views throughout his life are encompassing of all people, but his most eloquent, forward looking and healing ideas are. He wrote in one poem that while being released from a state of bondage he had a glimpse of how the *Gītā* is in the *Qur'ān* and the *Qur'ān* is in the *Gītā*.[103] Iqbal had numerous glimmers of the interrelationships and spiritual equivalences and mutual indebtednesses of the traditions. Perhaps these glimpses of the sun were occasionally clouded by social pressures. (What can the prophetic poet ahead of his time do when fearful masses demand a return to oversimplified views?) Iqbal in his deepest views nevertheless had a sense that "the family of God" is very inclusive. "Only one unity is dependable, and that unity is the brotherhood of man, which is above race, nationality, color or language....So long as men do not demonstrate by their actions that they believe that the whole world is the family of God...the beautiful ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity will never materialize."[104]

Human creativity was the praiseworthy trait Iqbal discussed and celebrated most. He believed Muslim legal scholars, economists, and designers of social institutions have to be creative to fulfill their roles. Iqbal said a

prophet's religious experience and authenticity can be judged by examining what sorts of men and societies have developed from the spirit of his message.[105] Iqbal believed that the human being is God's apprentice, helper and creative collaborator, the human beings in each generation must be allowed the freedom to solve their own time's particular problems, Iqbal believed. "The only effective power, therefore, is the rearing of self-concentrated individuals. Such progressive individuals alone reveal the depth of life. They disclose new standards in the light of which we begin to see that our environment is not wholly inviolable and requires revision."[106] To keep alive the insights of those individuals should be a good portion of any education. The hard work of answering the social problems of our day will require all the wisdom, compassion and dedicated effort we can muster. I wonder if you share Iqbal's faith in such individuals and if you can envision the part they can play in working out the crises we face?

Iqbal urges us to remember: "The man of love, who sees men with God's eye,/Loves heathen and believer equally./Give both of them a warm place in your heart. /Woe to the heart if heart from heart should part./...Distinguish men of faith from men of hate./Seek out a man of God for your soul mate."[107]

Who is a "man of God"? A fiery fundamentalist preacher? Not only in Islam, but also in Christianity and Hinduism there are a growing number of fundamentalists. The reason there are so many fundamentalists today is that too many 20th-century intellectuals swooning with science began to think religion unimportant. They ill-advisedly abandoned a faith in the transcendent and offered no alternative but modern secularism devoid of the transcendent. This jettisonning of soulfulness ignores an important fact, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out: "Human beings have demonstrably been, and continue to be, spiritually oriented creatures, to some significant degree conscious of living in an environment which is both transcendent and mundane...A society cut off from an effective awareness of that transcendence will appear radically unsatisfactory to most of us and will eventually be unable to survive...societies not realistically related to the mundane will not survive either."[108]

I wonder: if Iqbal were here today would he be able to consider those who see the creative unity and the divine patterns of order in the universe, such as Vaclav Havel and Thomas Berry, as "men of God"? I like to think he would see "men of God" as varied, creative souls integrating new knowledge, saving lives in the human community, fathoming life's meanings,

reconceptualizing time-honored visions. He would see men and women who nurture an awareness of the everchanging life of religion renewing itself, adapting to new generations' needs, as "people of God." As someone able to see "the *Qur'ān* in the *Gītā* and the *Gītā* in the *Qur'ān*" he would agree that the dedicated strivers humanity needs most today are the ones engaged in compassionate service and creative explorations, not in destructive explosions.

## Endnotes

1. C.G. Jung writes about the collective unconscious in many places, including *Psychological Reflections*, ed. Jolande Jacobi, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, pp. 22-35. See also James Hillman, *A Blue Fire*, ed. Thomas Moore, New York: Harper Collins, 1991, pp. 8-9, 88-89, 223.
2. In yoga parlance the term *vasanas* means "impressions left by past actions, subtle memories that influence one's outlook and future, the knots of existence."
3. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959; and *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or, Cosmos and History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.
4. It's ironic that my father had known the rigors of WW II, serving in France and other European nations in the 71st infantry, liberating the concentration camp known as Gunnskirchenlager in Bavaria, whereas I had not served in the Vietnam conflict. My "basic training" was living in the slums of New York City, building a home in the wooded mountains of Vermont (living for months in a pup-tent) and spending three and a half years in India. My initiation was different from his. I sensed that the philosophical aspects of a soldier paradigm were far behind him and were more fresh in my mind from the study of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, etc.
5. Alf Hiltebeitel has shown how the *Mahābhārata* War is archetypal and has ritual elements in his book, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, Albany: State University of New York, 1990.
6. Mircea Eliade spoke of this potential. For example in "Waiting for the Dawn" where he speaks of the possibility of experiencing sickness as initiatory ordeal and occasion for integrating personality and achieving spiritual transformation. *Waiting for The Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective*, ed. David Corrasco and Jane Marie Swanberg, Boulder: Westview Press, 1985, p. 17. Meanings of the experiences of sickness involve both body and soul. In a basic threat to physical wellbeing, when one's very existence is threatened, the great need is to be restored, transformed, made new. Therapeutic practices include faith in improvement, sense of dependence on forces beyond one's own control, becoming a new person, with new relationships and gratitude. To lack equilibrium and peace, to feel stressed and hurt, to seek relief, is to be in a situation where transformation is needed. Conditions are

heightened in sickness—fever, exhaustion, usual bodily functions become irregular. Suffering sickness thus forms a crucible for transition, a symbol for initiation to a new state—from chaos and death to life. Pilgrims speak of illnesses suffered en route to sacred places as purifying, purges of dross and imperfections, or even the death of a previous self and its flaws, a preparation for a new life. James Hillman also discusses how afflictions sensitize us to sides of life, so that, in a sense, a wound is like an eye.

7. For example, see Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*, Berkeley: Conari Press, 2000.

8. *Bhagavad Gītā*, IV.42.

9. Ibid., XVIII.73.

10. Jesus said to turn the other cheek, and advised followers not to resist evil, but other cultures ritualized war, and spelled out conditions for a just war, a fair fight. The Old Testament's "A time for war, a time for peace," (Ecclesiastes III.8), and the *Art of War* by Sun Tzu seem to assume conflicts are sometimes inevitable.

11. *Bhagavad Gītā*, II.48.

12. The Roman *Aenead*, the Celtic *Lebor Gabala*, Norse *Edda* are all war books. Carlos Castenada's work (*The Teachings of Don Juan, A Separate Reality*, and *Tales of Power*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995), teaches a mystical warrior philosophy; Samurai traditions of Japan, and other martial arts disciplines and philosophies of Asia also come to mind. Bushido, for example, is the Japanese warrior code of chivalry valuing honor above life. Warriors are to engage in fighting in a rigorous yet ritual-like manner as if battling against spirits instead of humans. Considering life and death as the same thing, recognizing that only the mind makes differences, the warrior must give himself to the conflict without concern for himself, like a baby living in the absolute present, with no thought for the future or for losing or gaining possessions, indifferent to survival, the thought of which itself brings defeat.

13. *Bhagavad Gītā*, III.30.

14. Chuang Tzu, 2.7. See *The Wisdom of Laotse* (which includes passages from Chuang Tzu) tr., ed. Lin Yutang, New York: Modern Library, 1948, p. 182.

15. My father answered, "And of course one must also know when there is nothing more that can be done." A few months later, on my birthday, my father passed away.

16. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore: J. Iqbal, 1958, p. 151.

17. The *Mahābhārata*, van Buitenen tr., 5(51)38.20, 5(51)40.25, pp. 278, 281.

18. Tankers "bearing what all these/ crazed, hooked nations need:/steel plates and/long injections of pure oil," as Gary Snyder writes in his poem "Oil." *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*, New York: Pantheon, 1992, p. 99.

19. Poet Alan Ginsberg said before he died he hoped to write an epic poem to

break through America's "sleepwalking consciousness." What difficulty it is that people who are sleepwalking are trying to avoid? "My view there was the fact that with a small portion of the world's population 7 or 8 %, we're consuming almost half the world's raw materials, living, as I said earlier, high on the hog, that to confront this understanding and lower our standard of living and begin to spread the wealth is just the opposite of what's happening in America now, so people are sleepwalking in the sense that they don't know what's gonna come. And then you get premonitions of it among fundamentalists talking about the rapture, Armageddon, the apocalypse; and you get premonitions among the old ladies and grandmas who say 'I never saw the world like this, things are really outta hand!' And you get premonitions among young punks who have a sense of despair about the future, you get premonitions from the mayors who say 'these cities are never going to be repaired,' but nobody wants actually to acknowledge that progress is over and it's time to figure out where we are, so it's like alcoholics in a state of denial—you know alcoholics anonymous terminology—that's what I mean by "sleepwalking." Going along pretending nothing needs special attention because it's so frighteningly massive, remaining numb to the oppression in the Middle east and America supporting oppressive regimes. But "If you don't go to a bad neighborhood it will come to you," as a modern proverb goes. Alan Ginsberg gave a reading at Butler University and was interviewed on a TV program in Indianapolis, October 1991. The text I include here is a transcription I made of his comments.

20. James Hillman writes about this in "Wars, Arms, Rams, Mars," in *Facing Apocalypse*, edited by Valerie Andrews, Robert Bosnak, Karen Walter Goodwin, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1987, pp. 126. Eric Hoffer wrote the book entitled *The True Believer.*

21. Wilfred Cantwell Smith "The Historical Development in Islam of the Concept of Islam as an Historical Development." Smith concludes that over the centuries the word *Islam* lost its relationship with God, shifting from personal piety to an ideal religious system, then to an external, mundane religious system, then to the historical expression of the system. There was a corresponding shift, it would seem, from faith in God to faith in religion. This is also discussed in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Mentor, 1964.

22. These observations come from the scholar of Islam and historian of religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith with whom I studied at Harvard. He discusses them in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 79. Smith studied the use of the term "Islam," and the word for faith over the centuries in Muslim thought, and wrote "The essential tragedy of the modern Islamic world is the degree to which Muslims, instead of giving their allegiance to God, have been giving it to something called Islam." p. 115. He writes elsewhere "Of the large religious movements on earth, probably the Islamic has even in practice diverged least far from being a system; and perhaps the Christian, for all its ever-changing mutiformity, next. Over against these, one would be hard put to it, if one were looking for the most amorphous, to choose between

the dynamic complex that we call Hindu, and the Buddhist movement." *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, pp. 125-6.

23. V.S. Naipaul puts it this way: "Islam was each man's salvation; it was also the faith itself, the Prophet's story; it was also the community, stitched together by innumerable communal acts and occasions. Unity, faith and discipline: that was the theme of Islam [according to Jinnah]. Something else underlay the feeling of community: anxiety about the hereafter. It was important, it was fundamental, it locked all the components of faith together: the anxiety whether, on doomsday, one was going to torment or to bliss...To be a devout Muslim was always to have distinctive things to do; it was to be guided constantly by rules; it was to live in a fever of the faith and always to be aware of the distinctiveness of the faith." V.S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p.106.

24. Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes that with the advent of Muslims in India in 1001 AD "the theory and practice of a large-scale religious closed community, organized, systematic, and formal, with boundaries" began a process of crystallization among non-Muslim groups there. "The Crystallization of Religious Communities in Mughul India," *Yad-Name-ye Irani-ye Minorsky*, Tehran: Yad-Name-ye Irani-ye Minorsky, 1969, p. 23.

25. Cited by John Ferguson in *War and Peace in the World's Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 124.

26. *Qur'ān*, 2.190-191, 193.

27. More on *jihād* at website http://www.alislam.org/short/jihad/toc.html

28. Muhammad Mishkat, *Book of Jihad*, chapter 1, section 2.

29. *Al-Tasharraf*, part 1.

30. Mishkat, *Book of Rulership and Judgment*, Chapter 1, section 2.

31. Sahih al Bukhari, *Book of Sacrifices*, 25.4.

32. The classical commentary referred to here is Ruh al-Bayan. The points in this paragraph and the previous four notes come from "Jihad in Holy Qur'an and Hadith," at an informative website with the address http://www.tariq.bitshop.com/misconceptions/jihad/jinqh.htm

33. *Qur'ān* 9.20. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, tr. Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, Beltsville, Maryland: Amanà Publications, 1989. Both text and commentary are on p. 442.

34. The grand mufti is the highest authority on Islamic law in Arabia.

35. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, tr. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickhall, New York: The New American Library, 1963, Surah 4, "Women," verse 94.

36. The ones who planned 9/11 were members of a violent insurgency—a political activity that can only gain political legitimacy by acquiring enough authority in a society. Some movements beginning as insurgencies end up as nation states, others shrivel as ignominious fiascoes. So the 9/11 insurgency hoping for religious totalitarianism may represent a new world power or it may fade; time will tell. This point is argued by Michael Vlahos in "Understanding the Enemy," in *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 8, 2001, p. 49.

37. *Bhagavad Gītā* XI.33. Robert C. Zaehner's *Our Vengeful God*, discusses the dangers of this philosophy when misused. There is always a danger of delusion when one feels under s special dispensation. Osama bin Laden in a conversation taped around Nov. 9, 2001 spoke of *fiqh* or law in this way: "Those [worldly people] who do not follow the true *fiqh*—the *fiqh* of Muhammad, the real *fiqh*—they are just accepting what is being said at face value" and also of the suicide hijackers of 9/11: "Those youth who conducted the operation did not accept any *fiqh* in the popular terms, but they accepted the *fiqh* that the Prophet Muhammad brought," as if in his self-ordained religious interpretation a higher law exonerated the murder.
38. Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi (1907-1966), another Indian thinker, interpreted the *Gītā* in terms influenced by socialist thought. See Kosambi's "Social and Economic Aspects of the Bhagavad Gita," in *Myth and Reality*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1983, pp. 12-41. See Greg Bailey, "On D.D. Kosambi's Interpretation of the Bhagavadgita" in *Indologica Taurinensia*, vol. XII (1984) pp. 343-353.
39. *Bhagavad Gītā*, III.19.
40. Ibid., XVIII.57.
41. Ibid., V.25, XII.4.
42. Ibid., XIII.15.
43. Ibid., XI.55.
44. Ibid., XI.55.
45. For an extensive discussion of these issues see Rajiv Malhotra, "Gita on Fighting Terrorism," at http://www.sulekha.com/column.asp?cid=151415
46. *Bhagavad Gītā*, VI.30.
47. Ibid., VI.30.
48. *Qur'ān* 8.62.
49. Information in this paragraph is from John Ferguson, *War and Peace in the World's Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 125-136.
50. James Hillman, *A Blue Fire*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1991, p. 187.
51. Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, New York: Perennial Library, p. 13.
52. Ibid., p. 13.
53. Ibid., p. 29.
54. Ibid., p. 29. Perhaps the sense of uniqueness is more common than Hoffer realized. While the Jews were the "Chosen People," and the Muslims had the final "Seal of the Prophet," and the Christians said there is no salvation outside the church, classical Hinduism considered outsiders "Mlechcha" (barbarians), the Greeks called outsiders barbarians, the Chinese believed their emperor was at the center of the universe, the British believed they had the "white man's burden" to civilize the world, and Americans have believed they have a special role in the world.
55. Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, p.30. For a more recent philosophical discussion of similar issues, how victims develop a sense of identity which can become virulently monomaniacal see Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, tr. Barbara Bray, New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001.

56. Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, p. 34.
57. Ibid., p. 35.
58. Ibid., p. 38.
59. Salman Rushdie says of the extremists: "Poverty is their great helper, and the fruit of their efforts is paranoia. This paranoid Islam, which blames outsiders, 'infidels,' for all the ills of Muslim societies, and whose pronosed remedy is the closing of those societies to the rival project of modernity..." Salman Rushdie, "Yes, This Is About Islam," *The New York Times*, Nov. 2, 2001, Op Ed page.
60. Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, p. 64.
61. There is a fractal pattern of ascetic leaders—strong souls emerging from the desert to reform the corrupt and luxury indulgent Umma, the Muslim community, of their times. These figures of righteous anger insist on renewing the original pure teachings in the history of Islam. Yusuf ibn Tashfin in the 11th century, for example, and Abdul Aziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia, for another. These are just two prophetic heroes of Islam of the austere style. In recent times Osama bin Laden seems to have seen himself as such a figure.
62. Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, p. 52.
63. Ibid., p. 89.
64. Ibid., p. 94.
65. Ibid., p. 95.
66. The recent Nobel prize winner V.S. Naipaul visited several Muslim countries in '79 and '80s and again in the '90s and observed how there's a problem when people cut their ancient roots and convert to a different religion. Denying the past, ancestral customs, ancient memories and culture. Naipaul criticizes the need of conquerors to obliterate preceding cultures. Convert must destroy their past, their history, deny and wipe out their memory; they must say ancestral culture doesn't matter or exist—they're told it's unworthy, shameful. Maybe this leaves a hollowness within, a fertile breeding ground for demonic imagination to germinate. But that's not the only way demonizing happens.
67. Cited in Rajmohan Gandhi, *Eight Lives: A Study of the Hindu-Muslim Encounter*, Albany: State University of New York, 1986, p. 71.
68. V.S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 118. Muhammad Iqbal, whom Naipaul calls a "recent convert" to Islam, was at least a third generation Muslim according to one scholar. Another source indicated Iqbal's brahman ancestors converted 300 years before Iqbal's time. Wilfred Cantwell Smith said any Muslim thinker who wants to develop Muslim thought further will have to first go back to where Iqbal left off.
69. See Joanne Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The epic world of C. Rajagopalachari*, Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1985, pp. 107-132. See also Nilmadhav Sen, "The Influence of the Epics on Indian Life and Literature, in *Cultural Heritage of India*, Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission, 1956 (second edition), Vol. II, p. 117.
70. Ibid., p. 114.
71. Ibid., p. 117.

72. Muhammad Iqbal, *Letters of Iqbal to Jinnah*, Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1974, p. 19.
73. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977., p. 42.
74. Ibid., p. 85.
75. Ibid., p. 87-88.
76. The last sentence is influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, in *Adventures of Ideas*, New York: The Free Press, 1967, p. 259.
77. V.S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 142.
78. Khalifa Abdul Hakim, *Islamic Ideology*, Pakistan: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1994, p. 373.
79. *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 29. My paraphrase is based on several translations.
80. Repetition without new nuances and excursions gets stale. Freshness, zest, and the extra keenness of intensity arise from spontaneity, "To sustain a civilization with the intensity of its first ardor requires more than learning. Adventure is essential, namely, the search for new perfections...thus the wise advice is, Not to rest in any continued realization of the same perfection of type...when spontaneity is at its lowest, in practice negligible, the final trace of its operation is found in alternations backwards and forwards between alternative modes. This is the reason for the predominant importance of wave-transmission in physical nature." Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 258.
81. V.S. Naipaul, Among the Believers, p. 91.
82. M.V.Kamath, *The United States and India 1776-1976*, Bombay: The Embassy of India, Washington D.C., 1976, pp. 110-115, 127-8, 132.
83. See the essay "Questions about the 'Rememberers': Smarta Brahmanas as Renewers of Tradition," in my book *Tyagaraja and the Renewal of Tradition*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994, pp. 207-229.
84. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, p. 89.
85. Ibid., p. 97.
86. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, tr. Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 1989, p. 69.
87. Ibid., p. 62.
88. For example it is striking that Islam refuses to be seen as one more religion which fits neatly into Mircea Elaide's schemes of sacred time and space. Yet the ancient stories about the angels and the kaaba, bear some resemblances to origin stories in other faiths.
89. Ibid., p. 106.
90. Ibid., p. 304-305.
91. Ibid., p. 305-308.
92. Tallal Alie Turfe, *Patience in Islam: Sabr*, Elmhurst, N.Y.: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1996, pp. 45-6.
93. The "Muhammadan Light" is like the active intellect of Hellenistic philoso-

phy, according to Sufi scholar Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 224.
94. The *Mahābhārata,* Book V., line 1517. In J.A.B. van Buitenen's translation, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, vol. II, p. 281-2.
95. Or "No man has believed perfectly until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." This saying is attributed to Muhammad.
96. Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, p. 79.
97. *Bhagavad Gītā*, V.25, XII.4.
98. Ibid., II.63.
99. *The Koran*, tr. by N.J. Dawood, London: Penguin Books, 1959, p. 379. This passage is in Surah 5, line 72, in the traditional arrangement.
100. These two quotations are cited by Thomas Friedman in "The blame game that Arab regimes play," *The Indianapolis Star*, Nov. 7, 2001, p. A16.
101. Cited in Thomas Friedman, "Islam's ability to adapt to modern times," in *The Indianapolis Star*, Nov. 19, 2001, p. A10.
102. Fazlur Rahman, "The Law of Rebellion in Islam," *Islam in the Modern World,* ed. Jill Raitt, Columbia: University of Missouri-Columbia, 1983, p. 10.
103. *Bang-e-dara*, Song of the Craven-bell, Kullayati-Iqbal (Urdu), Lahore: 1963. Cited by Purushottama Bilimoria, "Muhammad Iqbal and the *Bhagavadgita,*" (in two parts) *The Journal of Religious Studies* (Patiala) XVII no 2 Spring 1989, pp 77-93; sequel XVII no 3 Autumn 1989, pp 70-81.
104. Muhammad Iqbal, 1938 New Year's Day radio address, Lahore, Pakistan, All India Radio, cited in Rajmohan Gandhi, *Eight Lives: A Study of the Hindu-Muslim Encounter*, Albany: State University of New York, 1986, p. 78.
105. Muhammad Iqbal, *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Delhi: Kitab Publishing House, 1974, pp. 124-5.
106. Ibid., p. 151.
107. Muhammad Iqbal, cited in Rajmohan Gandhi, *Eight Lives*, p. 78-79.
108.Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Fundamentalism in the modern world," *India International Centre Quarterly*, Spring 1990, p. 41.

# *Bhagavad Gita*: Seeing Nonviolence in the Violent Play of God

Swami B.V. Tripurari

When we portray violence in a drama, none of the actors are actually hurt. It is only play. Perhaps if we could stand back from the drama of everyday life and view it as if it were just that, a drama to which we are only a witness, we could better understand the violence in our lives and, from the vantage point of the soul, we could see that no one really gets hurt. This is precisely what the *Bhagavad-gītā* advocates, and from the position of witnessing the human drama rather than being caught up in it, Śrī Krishna invites us to exit the theater of the human drama and accept a role in another drama—the play of God (*līlā*).

The play of God is the larger circle within which the drama of humanity appears as a smaller circle. However, the larger circle of God's play occasionally appears within the smaller circle of humanity to convey mystic insight into the nature of both of these dramas. The *Bhagavad-gītā* is a prime example of this.

Krishna's counsel in the *Bhagavad-gītā* represents the most concentrated segment of time he spends on directly instructing humanity throughout his entire play on earth. The sacred text teaches us all that we need to know about the drama of human life. We learn the mystery of how inaction can be action, how nonviolence within humanity can be violence. We also learn all we need to know about God's play to prepare ourselves for a role within it, including the mystery of how action can be inaction, how violence within God's play can be nonviolence.[1]

The mystery surrounding God's descent within humanity is discussed at the beginning of the *Gītā*'s fourth chapter. In his introductory remarks Krishna explains things about himself that make his Godhood apparent to


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Arjuna. Arjuna understands that his dear friend is God himself, mystically appearing within the world as if he were a player in the human drama. The *Gītā* thus explains the principle of the *avatāra*. Understanding this principle is foundational to understanding the nature of the yogic war—the Battle of Kurukṣetra—that Krishna implores Arjuna to participate in.

Krishna begins chapter 4 by explaining the history of the science of yoga and his own participation in its dissemination, which involves his instructing the sun god Vivasvān thousands of years before his conversation with Arjuna. His statement creates a doubt in Arjuna's mind and thus Arjuna questions his friend and mentor.

"Arjuna said: 'You took birth long after Vivasvān was born. How then am I to understand that you instructed him previously?'"[2] By asking about Krishna's apparent recent human birth in contrast with the ancient celestial birth of the sun god at the dawn of creation, Arjuna paves the way for Krishna to enlighten him about his omniscience, his eternality, and the mystic nature of his appearance in this world.

"The Lord of Śrī said: 'Arjuna, both of us have passed through many births. I know all of them, whereas you, subduer of enemies, do not. Although I am the controller of all beings, nevertheless, remaining in control of my material energy, I manifest by my own inner power.'"[3]

Here verse 6 is particularly significant. Krishna says that his descent is under the jurisdiction of his primary potency (*ātmā māyāya*)[4] and that when he descends he remains in control of his secondary potency, material nature (*prakṛtim svam*).[5] This is significant because it tells us that God, while descending, remains aloof from the governing influence of the human drama—material nature. Furthermore, we learn that God has a special mystic potency that facilitates his descent.

This special potency is God's primary potency that governs all of his personal activities and those of his perfected devotees.[6] It is his own personal power constituting his essence or intrinsic nature (*svarūpa*). God's play comes under the jurisdiction of his primary potency, even when it appears within the smaller circle of our human drama, and it is never influenced by his secondary potency over which he has full control. It is independent of the laws of material nature even when functioning within nature. From it—God's play—we can expect miracles on earth. As we shall see, the Battle of Kurukṣetra involves such miracles. Arjuna's participation in it also requires nothing short of a miracle, for he must become God-like himself.

The *Bhagavad-gītā* teaches us what this entails. The starting point is detachment from the fruits of one's work, because God's play is not based on the erroneous reading of material manifestations that arises from attachment to them. The extent to which one is attached to an object corresponds to the degree to which one's eye of objectivity is obscured. Thus, detachment reveals the nature of the world and the necessity of witnessing it rather than wallowing in it. Furthermore, genuine detachment arising from mystic insight makes one aloof from the influence of material nature and it is thereby the basis of nonviolent life within God's play.[7]

Before discussing God's play further, let us first examine the nature of material attachment within the human drama and how it fosters violence even when it speaks of nonviolence. We shall also look at the task before Arjuna in the *Gītā* and see how his initial advocacy of nonviolence actually constitutes violence. We will discuss how the entire *Bhagavad-gītā* advocates transcending material attachments and the violence they involve for the sake of entering into God's play and a life of absolute nonviolence. In returning to God's play, we will examine the Battle of Kurukṣetra in particular, which is an excellent example of nonviolence within violence under the jurisdiction of God's mystic potency.

While God's play involves detachment, the human drama is based on attachment. According to the *Gītā,* attachment to the fruit of one's work is the basis of exploitation and thus violence.[8] In this condition, the soul thinks itself to be the doer of acts that are in reality performed by material nature.[9] Thus, it lives in a virtual reality under the stern hand of the karmic law that governs both the psychic and the physical plane. It is the soul's material desire or attachment that causes material nature to react and imprison the soul in its karmic web.

Attached to and thus identified with matter, units of consciousness imagine necessities that are in fact only relative to matter. While the soul is eternal, it struggles with the threat of death when identified with matter, for the material manifestation it identifies with is not enduring. Under karmic law the soul moves out of a necessity born of material identification.

Because the body has needs, those who identify with it feel needy themselves. We live in the human drama at the cost of others. Here everyone is on the take. One living being is food for another. Short of realizing this predicament and making a comprehensive solution to it, our giving is tinged with getting, our nonviolence with violence. On this plane we must kill in order to live, however politely.

In the human drama, people are their attachments. Desire makes the world of *saṁsāra* go 'round. The task that the *Gītā* lays before us is to slay our attachments and extinguish the material desire that generates the human drama. It asks us to die an ego death to live without struggle, to be free from violence and all forms of exploitation. Our identification with matter, our material ego, must die if our soul is to have a life of its own. This is what Krishna asks of Arjuna: to slay his material ego and to become established in his real self. While Arjuna, due to his material attachments and subsequent identity based on those attachments, hears Krishna asking him to fight against his own relatives, in reality Krishna asks him to slay his attachments and thus free his soul.

Arjuna speaks eloquently in the first chapter of the *Gītā*, advocating inaction and nonviolence in the face of a great fratricidal war. But before doing so, he asks Krishna to drive his chariot between the two armies so that he can see those who have assembled to fight. Krishna does so, commenting that both armies are one—Arjuna's relatives, the Kurus.[10] Krishna stops Arjuna's chariot in front of Bhīṣma and Droṇa for good reason. These two personify Arjuna's greatest attachments. They represent his entire martial career and his closest family ties, Droṇa being his military guru and Bhīṣma his grandfather, who took the place of his deceased father in raising him. By stopping Arjuna's chariot in front of these two warriors against whom Arjuna will have to fight, Krishna, in his first act of the *Gītā*'s drama, speaks loudly to us about the nature of material attachment and its power to distort reality. All of Arjuna's arguments for nonviolence, however well-reasoned and however valid under different circumstances, amount to a grand rationalization arising from material attachment. He is unwilling to dismantle his identity within the human drama when the time to do so arrives of its own accord on God's schedule.

Arjuna speaks of compassion and despair at the thought of the violence such a war will entail. The thought of fighting with his relatives makes him feel as though he is losing his mind. He does not see how any good can come from the battle. He feels that while others may be overwhelmed by greed for a kingdom and thus prepared to fight, he is not. He argues on the basis of the importance of preserving family tradition, religious principles, and so on.[11] He concludes that pacifism is the best course: "It would be better to be killed unarmed and unresisting."[12] Again, all good points, were they not raised in this particular context.

The context is that Arjuna is seated before God in the midst of his play—

a play intended to deliver Arjuna from the illusory human drama. To do this, Krishna, again, places Arjuna before his greatest attachments, and encourages him to slay them. Materially speaking, we are our attachments, and slaying them is what is involved in dismantling our illusory, fleeting, material persona, which is a prerequisite for landing our role in the eternal play of God.

Arjuna's reluctance to fight and his advocacy of inaction or nonviolence are not only grand rationalizations for maintaining material attachment, but, from the vantage point of God's play, they are nothing less than an expression of violence. His overt inaction and nonviolence are subtle forms of passive aggression. They are violence to the soul because they implicate him further in karmic bondage. Everything belongs to God, and when we imagine things as belonging to ourselves, we not only deny the proprietorship of God, we turn others into objects of our sense indulgence and emotional needs, viewing them through the lens of our imagined mental/sensual identity. We reinforce the illusory roles we and other souls play in the human drama at the cost of self-realization and a role in God's play.

From a purely spiritual perspective, the human drama is ultimately self-destructive. While consciousness animates matter, the subsequent movements of matter obscure the fact that consciousness is its animator. Consciousness is thus lost to itself. When a person acts such that he completely obscures his potential, forgetting who he is, we call this act of violence self-destruction. Thus, from the vantage point of God's play, the extent to which one is not involved in transcending God's secondary potency one renders the entire human drama an act of self-destruction.

This is not to say that nonviolence within the human drama is worse than overt violence. The *Gītā* considers nonviolence a godly quality,[13] one that should develop in a person who is cultivating spiritual life. Arjuna, however, is a *kṣatriya,* a warrior. In the socio-religious scheme of the *Gītā,* qualified violence has a place in the political arena. It is considered religious for a warrior to fight for a religious cause. But the *Gītā,* while arising in a socio-religious framework, is ultimately not about a socio-religious orientation to life. From the purely spiritual vantage point of the *Gītā*'s conclusion, even religious life aimed at material remuneration in this life and heavenly attainment in the next is a form of exploitation and violence to the soul.

The vast majority of people do not read the *Gītā* for directions on socio-religious life, but rather for inspiration in spiritual life. In the *Bhagavad-gītā,* such socio-religious life is only mentioned in passing, with at best a

view to emphasize the fact that spiritual life has, at its foundation, dutiful, responsible living. In the entire *Bhagavad-gītā,* there are only eight out of seven hundred verses in which Krishna directly encourages Arjuna to fight because it is the religious duty of a warrior to do so.[14] These verses appear only because Arjuna argued that it would be irreligious to fight the war, and even in replying to Arjuna's mistaken notion, Krishna concludes this section of verses with an advocacy of yoga.[15] When understood in context, any other verses in the *Gītā* that appear to advocate the righteousness of a religious type of war are clearly addressing a particular stage of yogic pursuit that Krishna wants Arjuna to engage in.[16]

Socio-religious life involves coloring the human drama with a Godly brush, whereas spiritual life involves transcending the human drama altogether and entering God's play. Modern readers of the ever-contemporary *Bhagavad-gītā* want to learn about the spirituality of yoga, and they find that the battle of life is won when the material ego is slain. It may be a warrior's duty to fight for a righteous cause, but all such causes pale in consideration of the plight of the soul itself. From chapter 1 through chapter 18, it is this plight with which the *Bhagavad-gītā* is primarily concerned—this and the soul's highest prospect.

Indeed, although Krishna appears, at first blush, to want Arjuna to dedicate himself to religious principles, in his concluding remarks he tells him to completely abandon religious concerns[17] and to stand firm on the stage of God's play, poised to enter this drama of devotion. Self-surrender in devotion and, more, self-forgetfulness in love constitute the stage on which the drama of God's play is performed, a drama and dharma that leaves no room for exploitation or violence—not even in its veiled religious expressions.

After 18 chapters of discussion, Arjuna finally understands what Krishna's sermon is about. Thus Arjuna surrenders to Krishna's will after understanding the reality that he—his soul—is a mere witness to the human drama, and that his highest prospect is in God's play. He fights without attachment, surrendered, out of love for God in a plane where action is inaction in that it is not karmically binding, where apparent violence is in fact nonviolence.

Fully developed in yoga, having slain his material ego and thus free from the web of karmic law, and now under the influence of Krishna's primary potency, Arjuna fights the battle of Kurukṣetra. As we learn in the beginning of the *Gītā,* the battlefield of Kurukṣetra is *dharmakṣetra.*[18] It is a right-

eous place made sacred by nothing less than Krishna's meeting Goddess Rādhā here some fifty years earlier. It was here, deep within the play of God, that Krishna admitted his being conquered by Rādhā's love.[19] Here Krishna becomes the chariot driver of Arjuna.[20] Within the play of God and devotee at sacred Kurukṣetra, where the devotee becomes the deity of God, what appears to be violence is in fact nonviolence.

What is true nonviolence? When a person understands himself to be only a witness to the human drama, he ceases to act in relation to it and is thus not bound by karmic implications. Furthermore, his enlightened, detached action has a liberating effect on others. Removed from the drama itself, and ceasing to generate a role in it for himself, having extinguished material desire, the soul is at last peaceful and truly nonviolent. He has taken himself out of the hectic life-threatening virtual karmic reality and attained lasting peace.

No time, it would seem, for war. Yet it is war, the Battle of Kurukṣetra, that in spite of Arjuna's yogic evolution and understanding Krishna asks him to fight in. What kind of war is this then? It is not a war of ordinary religious dharma, although all that is religious is included within its scope. It is a war of *prema-dharma,* the dharma of love that constitutes the play of God.

God's play is not action that is born out of any necessity. One might conclude that once satisfied a person has no reason to move. Desire—need—causes one to move and generates a false identity in the human drama. Free from the bondage of desire, why should one move? Peace holds more for us than all the movement of the world. While the *Gītā* reasons like this in no uncertain terms, the Song of God offers still better reasoning as well. Krishna tells Arjuna that if one is truly satisfied and full in oneself, another type of movement is mandated, that of celebration in divine service. Such is movement within the play of God. A celebration of his fullness, God's play overflows into human society.

By nature's law—the influence of God's secondary potency—all will die only to be born again.[21] But when God's play comes within the human drama, any death that occurs is under the jurisdiction of God's primary potency. Death in God's play is liberating. Those under the influence of God's secondary potency who come in contact with his play are liberated. They attain freedom from the virtual karmic reality without having to undergo the arduous battle of yoga.[22] They rest in the eternal peace of *mukti,* whereas those like Arjuna who consciously participate in God's play attain the full fruit of yoga in eternal celebration. What then was the blood-

shed of the Battle of Kurukṣetra?

The contrast found in the *Gītā* between the thought of killing millions of people—including one's own relatives—and the pure state of consciousness Krishna wants Arjuna to attain, must be noted and underscored. This contrast is there to teach us just how pure the devotee of Krishna must be, and just how high God's play actually is. Throughout the *Gītā*, Krishna teaches Arjuna what it means to be free from false ego, unidentified with the movements of one's body, renounced, selfless, and so on. This is no small accomplishment, and this state of consciousness cannot be imitated. As much as Arjuna is woeful at the prospect of war, he is awestruck by what Krishna is teaching him to be.

Arjuna's participation in the holy war of Kurukṣetra requires his being holy in the highest sense—free from all bias, including religious bias. The possibility of abusing this teaching of the *Gītā*, leading to antinomianism and an unrighteous "religious war," is avoided by the standard of consciousness mandated in the text, which is described at length. The person who is "not culpable even when slaying many people" and "who does not actually slay" is "free from all egotism and pure in intellect."[23] He has attained a God-like status and has no need to struggle, no need to fight.

Careful study reveals that it is practically unimaginable that one could attain this state, but the good news of the *Gītā* is that it is indeed possible to be such a person—a devotee—and that this is the perfection of life. It involves a state of consciousness in which, for the sake of emphasis, even violence is nonviolence. As unimaginable as this exalted state is, so too is the Battle of Kurukṣetra.

It is said that millions of warriors died[24] in the 18-day battle on a tract of land 80 miles in circumference.[25] And what were the weapons of the war? Bows and arrows empowered by mantras that produced extremely sophisticated nuclear-like weapons of mass destruction.[26]

This constitutes the largest human carnage in the history of the world, in which eight times more people died than the number of civilians and soldiers lost in all of the wars of the modern world combined.[27] Furthermore, the weaponry of the war is said to have been superior to anything known to humanity at this time, yet we have no war memorials to remind us of the tragedy, no burial grounds, no weapons to replicate, nothing whatsoever to remember or document the war—only the immortal *Bhagavad-gītā* itself. Did this devastating battle really occur?

Yes and no. The battle is not a historical event that can be documented

with modern methodology, nor is it something that could have taken place within the realm of human possibility. Yet if the war is merely a myth, then either there is no play of God within the human drama or the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the Battle of Kurukṣetra are not part of God's play. According to the *Gītā*, neither of these two are an option. Thus we are left with the conclusion that the battle did and did not occur. Its violence is nonviolence.

The history of this war is the inconceivable history of the larger circle of God's play coming with the smaller circle of the human drama. How can it be documented? Through the practice of *bhakti-yoga*, the yoga of love. In the consciousness of pure love for God, mature devotees hear Krishna's conch heralding victory for the dharma of love as he enacts the drama of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and commands Arjuna to take part in the yogic battle of Kurukṣetra—an event infinitely more real to realized devotees than the illusory, mythic drama of humanity's misidentification with matter. It opens for them the door to a realm of possibility that cannot be found within the confines of matter. In the homeland of the soul, nothing is impossible. It is here that Krishna's play, with all of its theological and philosophical ramifications, is eternally performed.

The play of Krishna is as human as it is divine. In the drama of Krishna's play, many things occur under the influence of his magical primary potency that do not quite fit into material calculation. Just as in drama things happen that do not happen in the "real world," things happen in Krishna's play that do not tally with our mundane sense of possibility. The play of Krishna is carefree, which at the same time is wonderfully filled with knowledge, lessons by which humanity can realize its own potential for love.

Krishna plays, and through this play he teaches and attracts us. Arjuna is encouraged by the most loving God to be instrumental in the killing of millions of people, and if that is not bad enough, some of them were his own relatives. Why didn't Krishna stop the war and convert Duryodhana by other means? Clearly he had the power to do so. The reason is that this was his play, his personal drama, in which no one is really killed, and, through it, he teaches everything we need to know to be absolutely nonviolent.

## Endnotes

1. See Bg. 4.18 for a verse that speaks directly about action in inaction and inaction in action. Also see Bg. 5.7. Otherwise, this is a recurring theme throughout the *Gītā*. Arjuna's reluctance to act is a form of passive aggression that is karmically implicating. Krishna's idea of fighting does not implicate one in karmic

bondage. It is ultimately about being in the world but not of it, as is Krishna's position.

2. Bg. 4.4

3. Bg. 4.5–6

4. Here I am explaining the *Gītā* though the lens of Gauḍīya Vedānta. Jīva Goswāmī calls it *acintya bhedābheda tattva*: God is possessed of inconceivable potency, or *śakti*, that is simultaneously one with and different from him. His inconceivable (*acintya*) *śakti*, by which he does the impossible, is referred to in Bg. 9.5 (*yogam aiśvaryam*). God's primary potency is referred to as his *svarūpa śakti* or *antaraṅga śakti* (internal/primary/spiritual potency).

5. This potency is referred to as God's *māyā śakti* or *bahirāṅga śakti* (external/secondary/material).

6. Bg. 4.6 speaks of God's primary potency governing his personal activities. See Bg. 9.13 (*daivīṁ prakṛtim*) for an example of this potency governing the activities of God's devotees.

7. Bg. 2.70–71

8. *Kāma*, or desire, is called very injurious/sinful (*mahā pāpmā*) in Bg. 3.37.

9. Bg. 3.27

10. Bg. 1.24–25

11. Bg. 1.27–44

12. Bg. 1.45

13. Bg. 16.2

14. Bg. 2.31–38

15. Bg. 2.38 concludes this section and in it Krishna uses the words *same kṛtvā* (equanimity in action) that define the yogic state. Indeed, the same word (*samaḥ*) is used in Bg. 2.48 to define yoga, and this verse is in fact an explanation of Bg. 2.38 and the entire section of verses under discussion.

16. We find such verses in chapter 3, which is about *karma yoga*. Those verses found in chapter 18 (18.46–48) are part of an overall summary of the entire text that takes us from dutiful socio-religious life to self-forgetfulness in love of God.

17. Bg. 18.66

18. Bg. 1.1

19. See *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 10.82.44.

20. The essence of the *Gītā* is found in the idea that at the zenith of spiritual attainment the devotee conquers God through love, and thus love itself is supreme. This is evidenced in the *Gītā* by the fact that the supreme Godhead Krishna becomes the chariot driver of his devotee Arjuna. In the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* he is defeated by Rādhā's love.

21. Bg. 2.27

22. According to Jīva Goswāmī's *Krishna-sandarbha,* this is relative only to Krishna's play and not to that of any of his *avatāras.*

23. Bg. 18.17

24. See *Hutchinson Encyclopedia* (1996) and *Macmillan Encyclopedia* (1981).

25. Kurukṣetra of today, with all of its important holy places relevant to the battle, is considered to be an area 80 miles in circumference, although the *Śatapātha Brāhmaṇa* 11.5.1.4 seems to indicate that it may have been larger in ancient times.

26. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda identifies the *brahmāstra* as a nuclear weapon in his *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* translation and commentary on 1.7.19.

27. This calculation includes the Civil War, Boer War, Mozambiquean War, Russian Revolution, Korean War, World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War.

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HOLY WAR: VIOLENCE AND THE BHAGAVAD GITA is a series of informative essays that explores the war depicted in the age-old Indian epic, the Mahabharata, of which the Bhagavad Gita is one small section. On the Kurukshetra battlefield, the supreme Lord Krishna enlightens his disciple and friend Arjuna about the mysteries of life, addressing such subjects as the nature of God; the characteristics of the soul; man's ability to overcome conditioning; and the path to ultimate reality. Krishna's instructions also involve the sensitive subject of violence and religion, for he encourages Arjuna to fight in a war that will take the lives of millions. This multi-faceted subject, of course, has never been as topical as it is today, a time that has shown us how post-modern religious extremism can result in horrific consequences—we speak specifically of the tragedy in New York on September 11, 2001. The authors of this volume use the ancient Indian text as a foil for this discussion, exploring the many fanatical uses of religion and the question of whether violence is ever justifiable, in the pursuit of religious observance or for any other reason. In this exploration, our authors look at Gandhi and nonviolence; the Islamic jihad in relation to the ancient battle at Kurukshetra; and the question of ethics and morals—showing how they can be used or abused in an attempt to justify religious violence.

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